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THE MAN WITHOUT A HEART

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RUBY M. AYRES

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THE MAN WITHOUT A HEART

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Chapter I

I WAS sad and weary-hearted,
And I thought I'd take a rest,
So I hopped the train, and started
To the place I loved the best—
To my home-town once again,
Just to ease my tired brain;
But instead of peace and quiet—to wanton riot
I went home again.
You'd never know that old home-town of mine—
You'd never seen such changes in the time!
The old Y.M.C.A. is now a cabaret—
And the girls all look so sweet—yes! so neat—yes!
And deuced pretty too.
And the men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives,
You'd never know that old home-town of mine!

The song with its queer mixture of comedy and pathos, and the loud rasping voice of the singer, stopped, as the gramophone ran down with a whir. The man on the terrace outside the long, open window moved restlessly, and frowned as he leaned on the low balustrade and looked into the moonlit garden below.

You'd never know that old home-town of mine!

The words were true enough, as far as he was concerned; he had not believed it possible for anything to change as utterly and completely as this England after an absence of seventeen years.

He had kept the memory of its wide fields and winding lanes an unfading picture in his memory, and had idealized its men and women, always comparing them favourably with those hard workers with whom he had rubbed shoulders and roughed it in the backwoods. And one fortnight of the holiday of which he had dreamed, and for which he had longed for many years, had sufficed to bitterly disillusion him.

He had come home to a town which had swallowed up the village of his youth, to fields covered with ugly modern stuccoed houses, to his mother's

grave, and the crushing realization that the marriage of his only and adored sister had turned out a disastrous failure.

In the room behind him some one started the gramophone again, and the crowd of noisy people in Linda's drawing-room took up the chorus of the song, singing it lustily.

. . . And the men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives,
You'd never know that old home-town of mine!

Rufus Asher smiled grimly to himself in the darkness. What had happened to England—to every one—that life as he had known it seventeen years ago should seem completely upside down, and a mockery of all the old memories and traditions he had held so dear?

Last night he had tried to speak of it to Linda, to put his thoughts into uneloquent speech, and she had laughed at him.

"My dear old thing, you're talking like a back number!" she said, rubbing her cheek lightly against his sleeve. "You forget that it's seventeen years since you were home, and in that time we've

all progressed. Nobody's shocked at anything now; we just take it all for granted."

He turned round, his back to the garden, and looked at the gay crowd in the room beyond the window.

They seemed happy enough. Most of the women were young and beautifully dressed; most of the men looked strong and fit for better things, so Asher thought, as he watched them fox-trotting.

This modern style of dancing was new and distasteful to him; as the music stopped once more, he turned hastily and moved further along the terrace into the shadows, anxious to escape observation.

He knew he had not been a success at his sister's house-party, and the knowledge made him ill at ease.

"You're not very sociable, you know," Linda had chided him earlier in the evening. "Talk about us changing! You've changed more than we have, Ruffo! I told every one what a rip you used to be, but you've left it all behind, haven't you?"

Was that true, he wondered, and he thought of the change in Linda's face—her too bright eyes

that never seemed to smile—and anger stirred in his heart.

Only four years ago she had written to him in rapture; she had met the most wonderful man in the world. The letter bubbled over with happiness and the glory of romance; it had stirred his lonely heart with envy and a faint jealousy, as he realized that he could no longer expect to be first in her life.

As children he and Linda had adored one another, and after he went abroad she had never failed to write to him each week, until she married Edmund Hyde. The change had come then, as he had known it must come; her letters had grown few and far between, and less confidential and spontaneous. It had seemed as though she purposely avoided answering his questions, or telling him anything of her home-life; but until he came back to England he had not suspected that she was unhappy in her marriage.

He had never met Hyde before, but he had conceived an instant dislike for him, although the man was a gentleman.

"What do you think of Edmund?" Linda had inquired, rather nervously, at the end of his first

day with her, and he had answered the question by asking another.

"Are you happy, Linda?"

It had not needed her flush or faltering eyes to tell him; he had known already, but she had tried her best to deceive him. After listening patiently for a few moments, he took her hand in his big clasp, holding it gently as he said:

"You can trust me; tell me what is the matter."

But she had only laughed constrainedly and drawn her hand away.

"You are imagining things, Ruffo. There's nothing the matter. I suppose we all get disappointed with marriage; it never turns out as we think it will."

That was so like a woman!—to try and protect the man she had married. He had not dared ask the inevitable question: "Is there another woman?" but he had sworn in his heart that he would find out, and that if Hyde was playing a crooked game he should be made to answer for it.

And then, as if guessing his thoughts, Linda had cried out:

"You won't say anything to him, will you, Ruffo, dear? Promise me you won't tell any one!"

"I shall not speak of it," he promised her; but

since then he had watched his sister's husband as a cat watches a mouse, furtively, and without exciting suspicion, but so far unsuccessfully.

The fellow was clever—too clever to be honest, Rufus told himself savagely, as the dancers came crowding out of the drawing-room on to the terrace; and he rose to his feet to look for the one woman of the many in his sister's house-party who had escaped his condemnation.

Barbara Weir was different from all the others, or so he believed.

His queer, critical mind had placed her apart with his dead mother and adored sister—the only two women who had sounded the depths of his affections. She had come to stay with Linda the day after his own arrival. She was young, twenty-three perhaps, and full of the joy of living.

"Not pretty! Oh, decidedly not pretty," so Linda had said one day when they had been speaking of her. "But there is something attractive about her, don't you think, Ruffo, dear?"

Rufus had not spoken to her many times, but she had not avoided him as most of the women did, and she laughed in friendly fashion at his pessimism, defending her friends against his bitter condemnation.

He interested even while he puzzled her, and sometimes she felt a tinge of fear when she was in his company. There was something so ruthless about him, so intolerant. Physically he was very tall and powerfully built, almost a lumbering man, one might say, with a shock of thick, unruly, red hair, which had been responsible for his name of Rufus, and a hard, rather lined face.

He had been for years very close to the seamy side of life, and it had left its mark upon him; he had learnt to distrust people, and to make friendships slowly; but where his affections were aroused he was capable of extreme jealousy, and the thought that Edmund Hyde was not treating Linda well at times almost drove him to frenzy for her sake.

Barbara Weir had laughed at his blunt philosophy.

"You're a cave man, you know," she told him. "You're the sort of man who would pick a woman up in your arms and carry her off whether she wished to go or not."

He had agreed grimly.

"Perhaps I am. At any rate, I am the sort of man who would commit murder if I saw another

fellow flirting with my wife, as some of them do here."

She had wrinkled her up her brows as she answered him.

"You don't approve of us, of course, but we're very harmless, really we are."

He thought of that now, as he saw her coming towards him along the terrace. She was with a youth who was leaning down to her, talking earnestly, and Rufus heard her laugh and saw her shake her head; then her eyes fell on him, and she came quickly forward.

"Bad man! I've been looking for you everywhere," she said.

She dismissed the youth beside her with a little nod, and turned again to Asher.

"I'm running away from an unwanted partner," she told him, candidly. "Will you take pity on me?"

"I'm sorry. I don't dance."

"I know you don't, and I don't want to dance. It's so hot in the drawing-room. Don't you think it would be nice in the garden?"

"Anywhere you wish."

They went down the terrace steps to the lawn

below; it was a warm, still night, with a romantic crescent moon climbing high above the dark trees, and the air was filled with the faint perfume of sleeping flowers.

"So you are running away from an unwanted partner," Rufus said. "What is the matter? Does he tear your frock, or tread on your toes?"

"Neither. I could forgive him those things; but he tried to make love to me."

"And you don't like being made love to?"

"Not by boys."

"And when does a man cease to be a boy, Miss Weir?"

She laughed.

"Is that a riddle? If so, I give it up; but I think some of you are boys all your lives."

"A happy state of mind, surely."

"I don't know."

They strolled a little way without speaking, then Rufus said, diffidently:

"I wonder if you would mind very much if I smoke a pipe? I have been longing for one all the evening, but my sister tells me that such things are not done in this enlightened company."

Barbara laughed.

"Please do. I like a pipe; it makes a man look

so happy and at ease. Of course, you abominate cigarettes?"

"I do."

"I thought so; you seem to abominate everything that men—most men, I mean—usually like."

"Is that a compliment?"

She hesitated.

"I am not sure," she said at last.

Rufus turned it over in his mind, then he inquired interestedly:

"What sort of things do I abominate that most men like, Miss Weir?"

She spread her hands with a vague little gesture.

"Well—dancing, and most of the other things we do here to amuse ourselves; and they're really very harmless amusements, Mr. Asher."

"Are they?" His voice was cynical. "Is flirting with another man's wife, or another woman's husband, included in that very 'harmless' category, may I inquire?"

She was silent for a moment, then she said, defensively:

"But every one does it, and it doesn't mean anything." He felt her eyes upon him. "You don't like women, Mr. Asher."

He hesitated.

"Present company and my sister always excepted, no," he said.

She laughed.

"Please don't be polite. I can bear the truth. Of course Linda adores you; she thinks there is nobody in the world like you."

"Perhaps that is fortunate for the world."

She stood still.

"Would you mind if we sit down? I believe I'm tired. There is a seat round the big oak tree over there."

He went with her silently, and sat down beside her, his back to the tree's gnarled trunk.

"I wish I'd got a brother," Barbara said, suddenly. "I should have loved him just as much as Linda loves you. I've never had any one really of my own. Mother died when I was three, and my father died in India when I was over here at boarding school," she said. "Ugh! how I loathed boarding school. I ran away once, but they found me, and I had to go back."

"Quite right, too," Asher said, calmly.

She turned indignant eyes upon him.

"What *do* you mean? How can you possibly judge?"

"All girls and women need discipline," he told

her. "You know the old saying, 'A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree; the more you beat them, the better they be.' Those sentiments are my own entirely."

He spoke half in fun, but she took him seriously.

"I think you are a very hard man," she said.

Rufus struck a match with which to light his pipe, shading it with his hands from the night breeze, and in its sudden flame he saw her face; a very indignant face it was at the moment, with eyes that were angry and rebellious. The flame flickered and went out, and he said:

"How can you have formed an opinion of my character? We have only known one another for twelve days."

"Fourteen," she corrected him, promptly. "I came the day after you did, you know."

"Fourteen, then," he amended his words. "And so in that time you consider you have correctly judged my character?"

She laughed.

"I believe in instinct, and in first impressions, and mine are both generally right."

"And so—I am a hard man."

"Yes, I think so. I think you would always

let your heart be governed by your head; and if people are like that, it really means that they have no heart at all."

"I am much obliged to you."

"Well—you asked me," she said, deprecatingly.

"I did, please go on! I am very interested."

She shifted her position a little, tilting her head backwards, so that the moonlight fell full upon her face.

"Linda told us a lot about you before you came," she said. "But you are different from what she said. I thought you would be quite young—in your ways, I mean—and very jolly! I thought you would like us all very much, and that we should like you——"

"And instead?" he questioned, as she broke off.

"Instead—well, you don't like us at *all!* We know that! And I think we're all too much afraid to *dare* to like you! It would seem like an impertinence."

"What nonsense!" he protested.

"Oh, no, it isn't," she insisted. "Do you remember that first night at dinner? You sat opposite to me, and you kept looking at me with such disapproval. I suppose you were shocked because I smoked and didn't refuse a cocktail and liqueur.

At any rate, I know I thought that you were the kind of man I should not like to offend."

Rufus frowned.

"That sounds rather as if you are afraid of me."

She nodded.

"Yes, I believe I am," she admitted, frankly. "You see, you're hard, aren't you, and intolerant, and critical? You think we're all just the limit here, don't you, Mr. Asher?"

He did not deny it.

"You must remember that I have lived for more than seventeen years amongst very different people."

"Still, you need not have shown so quickly that you disliked us."

"I am sorry. I apologize for my rudeness. It was quite unintentional."

He leaned forward, his hands hanging loosely between his knees, staring at the big house before them, with its many lighted windows.

"Linda says that I am old-fashioned, Miss Weir," he said, suddenly. "And perhaps she is right. "I've been away for so long, and it had always been the dream of my life to save enough money to be able to come home—for good! Well, I've come, and I wish I had not."

"Oh—but why? Have things changed so much?"

"Yes."

She gave a quick sigh.

"That's the war!" she said.

Asher laughed shortly.

"The poor old war! Everything is laid at its door. We are lucky to have such a plausible excuse and likely reason for everything we do."

"Were you in France?" she asked.

"No, they sent me to German East. I would rather have gone to France. We didn't do much good in the particular spot where I was, except get fevers and home-sickness. I was there three years before I crocked up."

"What did you do then?"

"They sent me back to Australia, and I got fit again; then the war came to an end, and I sold my various possessions, set my house in order, as soon as I could, and came home."

"To a changed, dissolute England!" she said, mockingly.

"To a changed England, certainly," he agreed, in his quiet voice. "Everything had changed, to me, at least! My mother was dead, and the old house where I was born, and over which I had

sentimentalized for seventeen years, had been hemmed in by horrible, new, stuccoed villas, and was used as a factory for somebody's patent pills. I find myself a square peg in a round hole, Miss Weir; even my sister——"

Barbara interrupted quickly:

"Oh, but she hasn't changed, surely?"

"I think she has changed most of all. I left her happy and contented, without a care in the world, and I come back to find her none of these things."

She turned her head away.

"She always seems to be having a good time."

He made rather a violent gesture of repulsion.

"Do you call this sort of thing a good time? This life of artificiality? Always mixing with this crowd of dressed-up puppets? Never being your natural self for one moment? . . . If you call this having a good time, you have never lived at all, Miss Weir."

"Never lived!" She looked at him with a strange expression in her eyes. The many lights from the house shone full on his hard, rugged face, revealing its intense earnestness, and she said again: "Never lived! What do you call living, then, Mr. Asher?"

He laughed.

"Freedom! The country! To be able to ride miles over prairie-land where there are no stuccoed abominations! To be able to breathe and go your own untrammelled way! To spend your days where nobody judges you by the cut of your coat or the brand of cigars you smoke. Where men and women are good pals and hard workers. Where at the end of the day you are dog-tired with honest work, and not because you have been straining every nerve to go one better than the man who lives next door. Where——" He broke off, conscious of her regard. "I beg your pardon; you should have stopped me. I am afraid I am an intolerable bore, Miss Weir."

"I am very interested; please go on."

But he rose determinedly to his feet.

"I have been extraordinarily eloquent for me, but I have nothing more to say. Shall we go back to the house?"

She did not move for a moment. Then she rose slowly and stood beside him.

"You are a strange man, Mr. Asher," she said.

"A hard man, as you told me just now," he answered.

"A hard man—yes!" she insisted. "I should not like to have you for an enemy."

They went back to the house, and she was claimed for the next dance immediately, so Asher went along the terrace to a window beyond the drawing-room, which stood open, a dim light burning within.

It was a handsomely appointed smoking-room, and at first sight it seemed to be deserted, but as he went forward some one stirred in a big chair, and his sister half rose from its depths, sinking back with a little relieved sigh.

"Only you, Ruffo! I'm so hot and tired! I came here to rest for a moment." A smile struggled over her face as she met his eyes.

"Are you tired too?" she asked. "Or merely bored?"

"Both, perhaps." He sat down on the arm of her chair, and she leaned her head against him.

"It's good to have you home," she said, softly.

He looked down with troubled eyes at her averted face. She looked what she was, an unhappy woman.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, abruptly, and she roused herself with an effort and sat up.

"Nothing particular. I saw you in the garden with Barbie Weir just now. Do you like her, Ruffo?"

"I hardly know her."

"Hardly know her! When you've been in this house together for a fortnight! Nowadays that's long enough for people to fall in love and get engaged and married too."

"Say divorced as well, and the story will be complete," he said, cynically.

She held up hands of mock dismay.

"I would never dare say such a thing, to you."

"You need not mind. I am rapidly becoming acclimatized."

He got up and walked to the window, where he stood looking into the garden, his big figure blocking out the moonlight.

"Barbie's going away to-morrow," Linda said, suddenly. "Did she tell you? I'm sorry; she's an asset to a party like this."

Going away! A crushing sense of dismay filled his heart. How could he tolerate the house when when she was not there?

Linda went on vaguely.

"I wonder she hasn't got married! She must have had plenty of chances. Not that I can rec-

ommend matrimony exactly, but when you've got no money and no home of your own it has its points, I suppose."

"Where is she going?"

"I didn't ask, and she didn't tell me. She hasn't any relations, you know."

"And no money, did you say?"

"Well, she can't have much. Her father was in the Army, and you know what Army pay is. I suppose she's got a certain amount, or she couldn't live." She shot a mischievous glance at her brother's broad back. "If she was any one else I might be tempted to believe she wasn't quite —well, circumspect! But as it's Barbie——"

"Miss Weir is a lady," Rufus said, stiffly.

Linda laughed.

"Ruffo, you rude boy! Aren't all my guests ladies? What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything."

There was a little silence, then he turned and came back to her. "Linda, what are you going to do with your life?"

He stood looking down at her, his hands thrust into his pockets, his eyes affectionately tender. She looked up, then swiftly away again, the colour rushing headlong to her cheeks.

"Do with it? What do you mean, Ruffo?"

"What I say. If you're not happy——"

She got up and slipped a hand through his arm, laying her cheek against his coat-sleeve.

"I've made my bed, I suppose I've got to lie on it," she said, in a constrained little voice. "Don't worry your dear old head about me."

"But I must worry about you; I can't help it."

"I know; but there's no need. You can't help me or alter things." She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Leave me alone, Ruffo, dear. I'm best left alone." She kissed him again, passing a hand tenderly over his rough hair. "You're the sort of man I should like to have married," she told him, with a little emotional catch in her voice. "A big, bullying sort of squaw-man, who would stand no nonsense, and yet be—oh, so kind!"

Rufus laughed gruffly, and thought of Barbara Weir. "A man without a heart," she had called him.

"And now we must go back and make ourselves agreeable," Linda said.

She went over to the mirror and powdered her nose and reddened her lips, Rufus watching discontentedly.

"Why do you use that stuff?" he demanded.

She looked back at him and laughed.

"Why? Because every one else does, I suppose."

"Good Lord, what a reason!"

"It's as good as any other," she protested. She waved her hand to him and disappeared through the French window on to the terrace again, and after a moment Rufus slowly followed.

The gramophone was still playing, and as he passed the drawing-room window he stopped for a moment and looked in.

There were many couples dancing, but he could not see Barbara Weir, and he strolled on to the far end of the terrace, and sat down in the shadows, pulling out his pipe again and mechanically filling it.

So she was going away. He wondered why she had not told him; it would have been quite an ordinary thing to have casually mentioned it; and again that crushing sense of dismay swept through him.

He had told her that he regretted having returned to England, but it had not been the truth; he was glad that he had come home; it had been more than worth while that in return for his many disappointments he had met her; perhaps some

day he would be able to tell her, and then . . . his thoughts scattered as hurried footsteps sounded along the terrace, and the soft sound of a woman's dress, and then a voice, nervous and almost on the verge of tears, spoke in a broken whisper.

"I was afraid I should not be able to get away. I thought we should not have a moment together after all."

Asher made a convulsive movement as if to rise, then sat passive once more, his hands gripping the chair-arms, his teeth clenched over the stem of his pipe, which he had refilled but had not had time to light.

And the soft, shaken voice said again with increasing emotion:

"Oh, I'm glad, glad it's going to end at last! I couldn't have borne any more. Edmund, are you sure, sure that it's all right? That you will never be sorry?"

There followed a man's laugh, and the answer in a man's deep voice.

"As sure as I am that to-morrow's sun will rise."

They passed close to where Asher sat—the girl and the man to whose arm she clung—so close that her skirts brushed him, and the faint perfume, which he could have sworn to, even if he had not

been sure of the voice with its unwonted agitation, for a second seemed to make the night air more fragrant.

Then came the sound of whispered words and a woman's sobbing laugh.

And to every word that followed Rufus Asher listened with calculating deliberation, his head craned forward, his eyes narrowed beneath their heavy brows, till the gramophone, starting again in the drawing-room, drowned the two voices.

People trooped back from the garden, where they had been spending the interval, and the girl at the dark end of the terrace beyond where Rufus sat moved.

"We must go back; they will miss us and wonder."

Asher heard the rustle of her frock, and her nervous laugh, as her companion rose quickly, barring her way.

"You will not fail, promise me, Barbie?"

"Do you need to ask?"

And then against the moonlit sky the two figures were blotted into one in a close embrace, and Asher bit his lip till the blood wetted it, to keep back a groan that rose from his heart, and crushed his clenched hands against his eyes.

That hound Hyde and Barbara Weir! For a moment he saw the world red.

When he looked up again they had gone, the terrace was deserted. He rose unsteadily to his feet, and stood looking up at the sky with its crescent moon and blue-black, limitless spaces beyond, the cool night air beating on his relentless face.

You'd never know that old home-town of mine—
You'd never seen such changes in the time!
The old Y.M.C.A. is now a cabaret—
And the girls all look so sweet—yes! so neat—yes!
And deuced pretty too. . . .
And men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives,
You'd never know that old home-town of mine.

The doggerel lines mocked and tortured him. He had thought her so different from the rest! How she must have laughed!

She had called him a hard man; well, she should learn how right she had been.

All that was cruel and brutal in his nature seemed to rise to the surface. He smarted with pain because he recognized his own weakness to-

wards her; he burned with indignation for Linda's sake, and for the insult offered to her beneath her own roof.

And although he did not recognize or admit it, bitterest jealousy was tearing from his heart the remaining roots of his belief in the goodness of human nature and of mankind.

He had placed this girl in a little niche apart, with the sainted memory of his mother and his love for his sister, and she had been unworthy of even his casual regard.

The day for which he had watched and waited had come at last, and he would not neglect to take full advantage of it, and make the girl who had ruined Linda's happiness pay to the uttermost farthing.

Chapter II

IT was long past midnight when Linda closed the lid of the gramophone with a resolute little snap, and insisted that every one must go to bed.

"You'll be so cross to-morrow that I shall hate the sight of you," she declared. "And Barbara's got a journey before her. No, not another word, I insist."

"And as the first thin end of the wedge—behold!" Edmund Hyde said, laughingly, and switched off the light.

There was a chorus of laughter and protest, and Rufus quickly stretched a hand past his brother-in-law and promptly turned the lights on again, his quick eyes noticing that Edmund had moved towards Barbara Weir.

"How mean!" she accused him, mockingly. "Don't they approve of kissing in the backwoods, Mr. Asher?"

He made no answer, and Linda began to drive her guests out of the room and upstairs.

"Come and have a smoke, Asher."

A man named Hugh Langely, whom Rufus rather liked, touched him on the arm, and together they crossed the hall to the smoking-room.

"Dancing not much in my line—getting old, I suppose," Langely said, stifling a yawn. "Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks, I've got my pipe."

Edmund Hyde had followed them, and was standing by the table mixing whiskies and sodas.

"Jolly hot, isn't it?" he said, casually. "This is the second collar I've ruined to-night. I must say I like dancing, though—keeps you fit! Do you good to take it up, Rufus," he added, nodding towards his brother-in-law.

"I should hardly be a success without the other accomplishments too, should I?" Rufus asked, coolly.

"What other accomplishments?"

"Sitting out in dark corners, making love to other men's wives."

Langely laughed lazily as he stretched his long, slim form on a couch by the open window.

"That's not an accomplishment, it's a crime, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Apparently not here," Rufus answered.

Edmund pushed a whisky across to him.

"Don't croak so much, man; have a drink and cheer up." He raised his own glass. "Well, here's luck!" he said, sententiously, and drained it.

Langely followed suit laconically.

"Ching, ching," he said.

There was a little silence, then Edmund Hyde yawned and looked at his watch.

"Past two! Lord, I'm off to bed; coming, you chaps?"

"My dear fellow," Langely objected, "give us a chance. This is the first time I've been really cool or comfortable all the evening. Leave me to it, for heaven's sake! I'll lock your beastly windows and shut out the burglars, if that's what you're afraid of."

"Righto! Good night, then."

He went away whistling cheerily, and Langely put out a languid hand and dragged another cushion beneath his head.

"Nice chap, Hyde," he said.

Rufus made no answer; he was sitting on the edge of the table, his hands in his pockets.

Langely twisted his head round and looked at him.

"I'll give you the large sum of one shilling for your thoughts," he said, after a moment.

Rufus roused himself and laughed.

"They wouldn't be worth it to you." He strolled over to the open window and looked into the deserted garden. "How long have you known my sister?" he asked.

Langely considered.

"About three years—two, perhaps," he said, at last. "Met her at the Barringtons'. Know the Barringtons?"

"No."

"Nice family; you'd like 'em. Young Barrington was at Oxford with Hyde, I believe."

"I see." Rufus turned and strolled back again to his seat on the edge of the table. "Do you know Miss Weir?"

"Do I know her?" Langely laughed, rather ruefully. "I do, and I know that she can't stand me: hates me, in fact!"

"Why do you think so?"

Langely shrugged his shoulders and settled them more comfortably among the cushions.

"One knows these things by instinct. I should have thought you would have noticed it for yourself. She never speaks to me if she can help it." He paused; then added, slowly: "She's a little

vixen, she'd like to turn me out of the house if she could."

Rufus was hardly listening; he had just heard Barbara's cheery laugh on the staircase outside, and for the moment it held his unwilling attention; then he heard her running steps upstairs, and the shutting of a door somewhere overhead.

Had she been talking to Hyde? Saying good night to him perhaps—snatching a few stolen moments on the stairs where they were free from interruption.

Barbara Weir and Linda's husband! It seemed as if those moments outside on the terrace must have been a dream, as if they could never really have happened; and yet, the passionate embrace had been real enough, and the breathless, whispered words.

And to-morrow, in a few short hours, they were going away together, and Linda's life would be ruined!

Langely had been watching him curiously from beneath his level brows, and now he said again, with a shade of interest in his lazy voice:

"I'll double my offer; I'll make it two shillings if you'll tell me what thoughts are capable of making you look so like a murderer."

Rufus stood up with a short laugh.

"It must be my natural expression. I'm tired. I'll say good night."

" 'Night, old boy—pleasant dreams!"

Langely lay back on the cushions and closed his eyes with a little sigh of contentment.

The house seemed very quiet as Asher went upstairs; the landing lights had been lowered, and outside the closed doors shoes and slippers of all sizes and descriptions stood neatly side by side or leaned sleepily together.

There was one pair—small black satin shoes with crimson heels—at which Asher glanced furtively before he hurriedly looked away again. They were Barbara's shoes, he knew; he had watched them twinkling round the crowded room, and they had walked beside him through the moonlight across the sleeping garden. He had felt inexpressibly drawn to her until that moment on the terrace; and now he hated her.

His face was ugly in its hardness as he went on to his own room and shut the door.

The window was open, and an edge of lace curtain stirred in the night breeze as without turning on the light, he crossed the room and sat down looking into the garden.

A little further along on the left the light from the smoking-room where he had left Langely shone out into the garden, making a square yellow patch on the grass.

Rufus filled his pipe and lit it, and leaning his arms on the window-ledge lost himself in thought, merciless thought of what he meant to do in the future.

Primitive methods were the only ones he understood; there was nothing subtle or clever in his mind; when he wanted a thing done he took the sledge-hammer, most obvious way of doing it; and to-night the thing he had set his heart upon was the saving of his sister's happiness.

She had always been the greatest factor in his life, and she was still his first and deepest consideration. Her happiness must be saved at all costs; it mattered nothing who else was sacrificed to that end.

And by the time his pipe was finished Rufus Asher had found his way.

He rose, and was about to knock the dead ashes from the bowl on to the window-ledge, when a faint, indefinite sound on the landing outside caught his ear.

A loose board—the creak of a door—nothing of

greater significance; to an untrained ear it would probably have passed unnoticed, but Asher had lived so long in the open that he had learned to read meaning even in the varied rustle of the trees and the trembling of the grass under foot.

So he put his pipe back into his pocket and softly crossed the room to the door. And then it came again, more definite now, a light step, a woman's step, and the blood beat in a wave to his face as his fingers groped through the darkness and found the door handle.

A clock somewhere in the house struck four, and under cover of its chime Rufus opened the door and looked out on to the landing.

A wavering flicker of candlelight was sending weird shadows on the panelled walls and low ceiling, and the candlestick was being carried by a woman who at that moment was descending the staircase. The loose folds of her robe were caught together around her as if to prevent the soft, soughing noise it would otherwise have made over the carpet.

Rufus Asher stepped out on to the landing, and as if she felt his presence, the woman turned with a little shrinking movement of fear, and saw him standing there.

There was a moment's silence, then she laughed softly.

"Ruffo, how you startled me! Can't you sleep either? I can't. I was going down to look for a book."

She came back and stood beside him, and he saw how pale she was and how her hand shook.

He took the candlestick from her and set it down on a small side-table.

"You're dropping grease all over the carpet," he said. "I am sorry if I frightened you, Linda. I didn't think it was you."

"You didn't think it was me! Who did you expect to see then?" Her bright eyes peered interestedly up into his face. "You bad boy! Were you going to keep a tryst with some one?"

They were both speaking in whispers for fear of rousing the house, but Rufus did not smile as he answered:

"You are lucky I didn't grab you from behind, or shoot at you, thinking you were a burglar. I generally carry a gun."

"A gun! Ough!" She pursed up her reddened lips distastefully. "Have you got it in your pocket, Ruffo?"

"No; and you'll take your death of cold stand-

ing there in that rag. Go back to your room. I can lend you a book if you want one."

She gave a little indignant cry.

"Rag, Ruffo! Do you know that this garment cost twenty-five guineas?"

His hard face softened.

"What a baby you are, with your fal-lals!" he said. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and stooping, kissed her. "Go back to bed and get warm."

"Warm? I'm burning hot now—feel!" She took his hand and laid it against her cheek; then she laughed and released him. "Good night, Ruffo, pleasant dreams!"

"Good night, my dear."

He watched her to the door of her room, past those little black slippers with the crimson heels, then suddenly she turned and came back, cuddling her little body into his arms and winding her arms round his neck. "You'll always love me, Ruffo? Promise!"

"Always."

He held her for a moment almost fiercely, then put her away, and went back to his own room.

He was up early the next morning; he walked down into the village and sent a wire off long before any one else in the house was astir, but as

he came back across the dew-washed garden he saw Barbara Weir standing on the terrace.

She wore a tweed coat and skirt and a little close-fitting hat, and as he drew near to her he saw that her face was sad.

"Good morning," he said, perfunctorily.

She turned at once and smiled.

"Good morning. I was just thinking how horrid London will be after this lovely country."

"You are going to London to-day?"

"Yes." She sighed. "My train goes at nine-forty; that's why I'm ready dressed; there won't be much time after breakfast."

He stood beside her, looking across the garden.

"When are you coming back?" he asked.

"Coming back?" She made a little grimace. "I'm not coming back, worse luck."

His eyes fell to the level of hers.

"Never is a long day, Miss Weir. I am sure my sister would be sorry to think that she is never to see you again."

She flushed faintly.

"I don't see why she should mind. We've been good friends, but friendships come to an end like everything else."

"I don't admit that."

"Don't you? It's true, all the same, and you ought to know that it is, seeing you have been abroad—how many years?"

His face seemed to sharpen.

"Are you going abroad?" he asked, slowly. She seemed to hesitate; then she nodded.

"I am, soon—yes. I don't know why I'm telling you, nobody else knows; not that it's a secret exactly; every one will know soon, but, I didn't want any one to know just yet."

"I shall not tell any one, I promise you."

She looked up at him swiftly.

"I know. I always feel that I can trust you. I suppose lots of people have confided secrets to you, haven't they, Mr. Asher?"

"Some."

The breakfast-gong sounded, and Barbara turned.

"We must go in." She gave one last look round the garden. "I wish I wasn't going away," she said, again.

"Why go then?"

"Why?" She looked up at him. "Because I can't always do exactly what I should like, I suppose."

They were at the house-door now.

"I am going to town by that nine-forty," Asher said. "If I may travel up with you——"

She looked up at him smilingly.

"Oh, will you? That will be nice."

"You are very kind," he said, formally.

They went in to breakfast together.

Linda was not down, but her husband sat at the head of the table, and Langely had just put in a yawning appearance.

"Good morning, everybody," Barbara said, lightly. She took a seat beside Edmund Hyde. "Bacon and egg, please—and a basin to catch my tears in. Edmund, do you realize that I am leaving you this very morning—really leaving you?"

Edmund made a mock gesture of despair.

"Alas! to my undoing," he moaned.

"Mr. Asher is going to London, too, so we're going to console one another on the journey," Barbara rattled on. She seemed to Asher as if she was talking for effect, trying to express a gaiety which she did not feel.

Edmund looked across at him.

"You are going to town, Rufus? Rather sudden, isn't it?"

"Oh, I'm coming back; you're not rid of me

yet!" Rufus answered, grimly. "But I've some business to see to, so I thought I'd get it over." He looked at his brother-in-law steadily. "Are you going up yourself?"

Edmund shook his head.

"No such luck; not yet, at least. I may steal a week-end later on, if Linda can make herself happy without me," he added, with a touch of sarcasm.

One of the maids came to the door.

"The car is waiting for Miss Weir, sir."

Barbara sprang up.

"Already? Good heavens, my watch must be slow! I won't be a minute. I must just say good-bye to Linda."

"Sorry Barbie's going," Edmund said, when the door had closed behind her. "She's a good sport, and just the one for a party like we are."

"Have you known her long?" Rufus asked. Edmund considered.

"Yes, some time—before I knew Linda."

"I see. Well, if you'll excuse me——" He went out into the hall for his hat and coat, and as he stood there Barbara came running down the stairs.

"Linda says you're to go and say good-bye to

her. She wants to know what you mean by going to London; she's very angry."

Rufus climbed the stairs obediently and knocked at his sister's door. Linda was sitting up in bed, very pretty in a lace wrapper and pink boudoir cap.

"Ruffo, you're not running away, surely!" she said, in dismay. "Why didn't you tell me? Are you so tired of us?"

"I'm not running very far, only to London, and I shall be back to-night; and I'm not a bit tired of you, and you know it," he answered, stooping to kiss her. "I've got some business to see to."

"Be back for dinner, then." She blew him a kiss, and Rufus went downstairs again to find Barbara already in the car.

"Hurry! hurry!" she called to him. "We shall only just catch the train, Edmund says."

"Hoping you will miss it!" Edmund supplemented from the doorstep. "Bye-bye, Barbie! Come again soon."

"Yes."

The car whirled them away down the drive, and out into the main road, and glancing at his companion Rufus saw that her eyes were full of tears.

She brushed them away indignantly.

"It's silly, isn't it, but I've had such a good time, and I hate saying good-bye to people."

He made no answer, but his heart swelled with bitter anger, remembering what he had overheard last night.

They had a carriage to themselves going to London, and Barbara seemed to have recovered her spirits, and laughed and chattered happily.

"I wonder if I shall ever see you again, Mr. Asher," she said, abruptly, just before the train ran into Victoria.

He looked at her with a strained smile.

"Why not? It's a small world, Miss Weir."

"I know, but I often meet people, and get to like them, and never see them again."

"Are you trying to pay me a compliment?"

"What do you mean?"

"Am I included in the people that you have got to like?"

She flushed slightly, but nodded.

"Yes, I liked you from the first moment we met. You see, you were different somehow, and last night, do you know, Mr. Asher, what you said about freedom has haunted me ever since."

"What did I say?"

"About riding miles over prairie-land where men

and women are good pals and hard workers—it sounded fine to me!"

He laughed gruffly.

"I dare say I let my tongue run away with me. You would probably hate Australia, and the people I like out there. I dare say at the end of a week you would be longing for London, and a new frock, and the men you danced with last night."

She made no answer, and the train ran into the station and stopped.

Rufus called to a porter.

"I will say good-bye, then," Barbara said, quickly. "We go different ways."

"I have a car somewhere," Rufus answered. "If you will allow me to drive you to your hotel——"

She laughed.

"With all my luggage?"

"It is quite a big car, and the luggage will not be in the way."

"Very well. Thank you."

"If you will wait a moment I will find it."

He left her for a few seconds, then came quickly back.

"The car is outside, and I have had your luggage put in, if you will come."

She followed him out of the station. A big closed car stood at the kerb, and Barbara's luggage was piled on top.

"Do you drive yourself?" she asked, in surprise, as he stood aside for her to enter.

"My man brought it, but I have sent him away. I prefer to drive alone."

"I see."

He got in beside her and shut the door. Barbara made a little grimace as she looked out of the window.

"We seem to have left the sunshine behind us," she complained. "It's been raining here, and there's quite a mist."

Asher glanced at the sky.

"We shall probably have a fog," he said, briefly. "But isn't this your usual London weather?"

"You talk as if you were not an Englishman," she challenged him.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I feel as if I am not. I have been away so long. I shall go back to Australia as soon as I can manage it."

Her face sobered, and presently she asked:

"Do we all seem so very horrid that you cannot bear to stay?"

"I am sorry if I give you that impression."

She made a gesture of repudiation.

"Don't speak like that; your voice sounds so artificial, and I know you are not that."

"Miss Weir, you know very little about me."

She frowned.

"Do I? Why do you say that?"

"Because I am sure that you do not realize what a—what a brute I could be—if I felt justified."

She laughed.

"That sounds alarming!" She leaned forward and rubbed the mist from the window. "You're going a long way round, Mr. Asher."

"I am trying to avoid the traffic."

"I see."

The rain was coming down faster. Asher opened the window in front of him, and the water trickled off on to the bonnet of the car like a little rivulet.

Barbara shivered.

"What a dreadful day!"

"Yes."

The swift motion of the car made her feel drowsy, and she was silent for some time; then suddenly she roused with a start and sat up at swift attention.

"Mr. Asher, where are we going?" She leaned forward again and peered into the wet, grey afternoon. "Why, we're not in London at all!" she said, in sharp amazement.

"No." With a sudden turn of the wheel he drew the car to one side of the road and stopped the engine, then he turned in his seat and looked at her with a grim face.

"I have something to say to you, Miss Weir."

"To say to me!" The colour ran into her cheeks, and faded quickly. "What have you got to say to me?" she asked. He did not answer at once, and she said again with a little catch in her voice, "Why do you look at me like that? You look so strange! I—what is the matter, Mr. Asher?"

He shifted his position, and stretched one arm in front of her, catching hold of the door handle, as if to prevent her opening it, as he said, in a curiously level voice:

"You told me last night that I was a hard man, Miss Weir, and you were right. I am hard, and that is why I have brought you here to-day. Last night on the terrace of my sister's house, when you were there with Edmund Hyde, I was there too, and I heard every word that was said between

you." His steady eyes never moved their relentless gaze from her face, and she sat perfectly still, staring at him as if fascinated.

"I had a great regard and respect for you, Miss Weir, until then! But now I know you are no longer worthy of my consideration. But I love my sister, and I am not going to stand by and allow you to ruin her happiness and her life. You understand?"

Twice she tried to speak, but no words would come. She was trembling violently, and her lips were white, but at last she stammered out:

"You heard—you heard—what—what did you hear?"

"I heard you arrange to go away to-day—with my sister's husband."

There was a tragic silence, then suddenly Barbara covered her face with her hands as if she could no longer bear the keenness of his gaze.

The rain pattered down on the roof of the car, and the drops chased one another down the window like tears, but for a moment the only sound of which Barbara was conscious was the loud, painful beating of her heart; it seemed to be throbbing up in her throat, choking her; then at last she spoke in a trembling whisper:

"What—what are you going to do with me?"

Rufus hesitated; then his face, which had momentarily relaxed, settled once more into hard lines.

"I am going to keep you a prisoner until you give me your word of honour that you will not see that scoundrel again, or until I am satisfied that you are no longer a danger to my sister's happiness."

Her hands fell slowly from her face, and she looked up with a sudden flash of courage.

"A prisoner! Such a thing is absurd. Impossible!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It may not be the way you do things in this enlightened England, Miss Weir, but it is the only way I know whereby I can secure my sister's happiness and peace of mind."

There was an eloquent silence, then Barbara laughed a broken, wavering laugh, which held a flash of defiance.

"And how do you propose to explain things to everybody?" she asked. "Do you think they won't wonder where I am, and why they don't hear from me? What will you tell every one?"

He answered unhesitatingly:

"What would you have told them if I had not prevented you from carrying out your plans? Would you have felt bound to explain, or give reasons for running away with another woman's husband? I think not."

Her face grew crimson, and danger sparks filled her eyes.

"You are doing a thing which is punishable by law," she said.

He hunched his shoulders indifferently.

"I have not much respect for a law that allows one woman to ruin another's happiness with impunity."

She sat silent, her hands tearing nervously at each other, then she said more quietly:

"Mr. Asher, I am sure you do not realize what you are doing. I ask you, I beg of you, for both our sakes, to let me go."

"No."

She sat staring before her at the dreary afternoon, her breath coming fast; then she broke out again:

"Where are you taking me? What are you going to do with me?"

"You will see presently."

"You are judging me and Edmund—unheard! You do not know the truth. If you did——"

"I am concerned with nothing except my sister's happiness."

She caught her breath with a frightened sound.

"You think so much of her?"

"She is all I have in the world, and I respect and honour her as I have never been able to respect or honour any other woman."

"I see."

She felt as if she were in a dream, and yet her brain had never been more clear and active; every nerve in her body seemed tuned up and ready to meet what was coming next; when he took his hand from the door she gave a little movement forward as if to open it, and he said at once:

"I should not do that if I were you. There is nobody about, and if you managed to run away I could easily overtake you."

She sat back again, breathing fast, and he started up the engine and the car moved slowly forward once more.

After a moment she asked: "What are you going to do with me? Shut me up somewhere—starve me? Oh, Mr. Asher, I beg of you to think!

You're frightening me—you couldn't be so cruel."

"I could be more than cruel to a woman who has treated my sister as you have, Miss Weir."

"How have I treated her? What have I done? What did she tell you?"

"She has told me nothing. I discovered it all for myself."

She broke into shrill laughter; her nerves were beginning to stampede.

"It's like a melodrama with you for the villain! Am I to have my hair cropped and wear a convict dress?"

"You are talking nonsense."

She turned to him with pathetic eagerness.

"Yes, we are both talking nonsense, aren't we? It's only just a joke, isn't it? Say that it is! We've been good friends, you and I! I like you —I——" She stopped, but he said nothing, and taking courage from his silence she laid a trembling hand on his arm.

"Stop the car and let me go, Mr. Asher. I'm frightened. Please—please let me go."

"No."

There was ugly, grim determination in his face and in his voice, and her hand fell nervelessly from his arm.

The blood receded from her cheeks as she looked at him, and a new terrible dread crept into her mind.

Was he mad? The thought turned her cold. One heard of such things, and read of them in the papers. That he was a strange man she knew for herself, even Linda had admitted it—and he had lived so long abroad and in wild circumstances. Supposing he was out of his mind!

The fear gave her back her self-control; she managed a pale smile.

"Well, wherever you are taking me, I hope there will be some food. I'm hungry. It must be long past lunch-time."

"I'm sorry. I'm used to going without food for hours myself, and I forgot. We have about another thirty miles to go."

The afternoon was drawing in quickly; the narrow road with its dripping wet, overhanging trees was dark and depressing. Now and again Barbara tried to read the directions on signposts that they passed, but it was impossible.

In spite of her fear she was conscious of a thrill of excitement.

The speeding car and the hard, set face of the man beside her made her blood leap, even while

the thought of the future touched her heart with apprehension.

He spoke suddenly.

"You have not troubled to deny my accusations, Miss Weir. I think you are wise."

She raised her head proudly.

"Why should I deny anything to you?"

He looked down at her, breathing hard, then he broke into rough speech.

"I thought you were different from all the other painted dolls I met in my sister's house. I believed in you—I was glad I had come back to this rotten country just because I had met you—and then——"

She looked up at him, pale to the lips, but with unflinching eyes.

"And then what?" she asked.

"You know the rest. I heard you and saw you for myself. I saw you in that man's arms, heard his words to you, and I realized what a fool I'd been."

She shivered, then she answered slowly:

"Yes, I think you are right to call yourself a fool."

The ugly lines in his face deepened.

"You are very candid, Miss Weir."

Her voice rose passionately.

"You are a fool! Just a blind, narrow fool in spite of all your boasted experience, so that you can only see along the pathway of your own bigoted opinions. You talk about all my friends and myself, and despise us; yet we are all a thousand times more generous and tolerant to one another than you could ever be! You make a friend of Hugh Langely, a man who, if you knew him as I do, you would want to kick out of the house. You think you are such a fine judge of character, so infallible." Her voice was biting in its scorn. "Some day you'll find out the truth; some day you'll be sorry; some day it will be my turn to make you suffer for what you're doing to me now."

The car shot forward with additional speed beneath the sudden spur of his foot, and for some time neither of them spoke, till he leaned forward and switched on the head-lamps.

They cut the darkness before them with widths of brilliant light, and Barbara closed her eyes with a little feeling of giddiness.

She was faint and over-wrought, and the darkness and dreariness of the countryside added to her fear. Where was he taking her? What would

he do to her? And with another spurt of failing courage she began to plead with him again.

"And if it had been your sister instead of me —if it had been Linda who was going to do the same thing—taking another woman's husband—would you have treated her like this?"

"Linda could never have done such a thing," he answered, obstinately. "It is not in her nature, and you will not help yourself by suggesting it."

"And Edmund?" Barbara asked, with white lips. "Are you going to take him a prisoner too, when you have settled with me? Or are you too much of a coward to bully a man?"

She saw the dull flush that crept to his sunburnt face, but he made no answer, and they had gone some distance farther before he broke out again.

"Twice in my life I have stood by and seen the ruin and unhappiness caused by women like you. For my sins I once imagined myself in love with such a woman, and she turned me down and went away with a married man—my best friend—a man with whom I had worked for years, and whom I trusted. She made him mad about her, and he left his wife, and his home and his work—every-

thing—for her sake. She ruined him, and he died four years afterwards, a drunken waster."

"And you blame the woman?" Barbara asked, fiercely. "What about the man?"

"She tempted him, she put herself in his way. If she had not done so, he would have been alive to-day, and happy and prosperous."

"And so you are punishing me because of other cases you have known."

"I am not punishing you. I am preventing you from doing harm to yourself and to my sister."

She laughed with tremulous scorn.

"You are, in fact, instituting yourself my guardian angel."

He made no reply, and with an effort she controlled herself sufficiently to say:

"Don't you see what an impossible thing you are doing, Mr. Asher? It might be all right in the backwoods of Australia, or places like that, but here——"

He broke in roughly.

"Here it would be better for every one if such things were taken in hand more drastically. Divorce and immorality are treated too lightly." His voice rose excitedly. "Why, years ago a man would have shot his best friend dead if he had

dared to treat his womenfolk in the way that all your friends seem to treat theirs to-day."

She made a hopeless gesture.

"Things have altered! You must see that! We all look at things differently."

"I can only see that one thing is right and another thing wrong. I can't alter the morals of the world, and I don't want to try, but I am not standing by while you wantonly ruin my sister's life. I love my sister, Miss Weir, hard man as you think me, brute and fool as you called me just now."

"You love her, and you hate me. Is that it?" she asked, bitterly.

Their eyes met for an instant in passionate antagonism.

With every word he spoke she could feel this man's determination and relentless power, and in spite of her rage and sense of fear and injustice she was conscious of unwilling admiration for him.

He was a squaw-man; he employed only the crudest and roughest of methods, but by their means he would work his will and accomplish the thing he had set himself to accomplish.

But she was totally unprepared for the sudden change that crossed his face, such a look of pas-

sionate revolt and rage that for a moment she was left with a blinding sense of unreality before he said, in a voice that carried with it unalterable conviction in spite of its violence:

"I will tell you something now, Miss Weir, something which you may disbelieve if you like, but which is the solemn truth, none the less. The night I met you I thought I had met my fate. As I said just now, you seemed different from all the rest. In spite of your nonsense and light-heartedness I thought you were good and honest, and I put you into a place in my life where hitherto only my mother and Linda had been. It was not that I ever flattered myself that you would give me a serious thought, but you were kind, and I never felt awkward or at a disadvantage when I was with you. I liked your company. I found myself looking for you if you were not in the room. Perhaps I have been spared much suffering because of what I saw and heard last night."

Barbara laughed scornfully, and the blood rose in an angry tide to his face.

"You may laugh and sneer at me," he said, steadily. "But I could have loved you! I could have loved you so dearly that I would have given you my life, had it been necessary to your happi-

ness." He drew a hard, difficult breath. "Well, that's ended and done with, thank God! You convicted yourself, and showed me what a fool I was, and that's all."

"And so you are doing this—to pay me out," she said, and then in a broken whisper she added: "You are very—clever!"

He stopped the car with a sudden jerk and peered forward into the darkness.

"There are two turnings here. I am not sure which is the road." He leaned past her and opened the door. "I am sorry, but I must ask you to move so that I can get out and see."

Barbara obeyed silently; her limbs felt cramped, and now she began to walk again she realized how cold she was.

The rain was still pouring down relentlessly, but the trees were thick overhead at that particular spot, so that she was fairly well sheltered as she stood waiting beside the car.

Rufus walked to a signpost at the cross road and peered up at the white board, and in that moment Barbara made up her mind.

She cast one swift glance behind her, then she turned and ran wildly, as if her life depended upon it, down the road along which they had come.

She was spattered with mud and drenched before she had gone far, but she did not stop. To be free—to escape, was her one thought! When presently she heard heavy steps behind her, it seemed to increase her strength; her feet hardly touched the ground as she sped on and on, her breath laboured, her hands stretched blindly out before her.

But fast as she ran, the following steps seemed to gain on her with every moment, and with sudden desperation she turned into the hedge which curved away a little at that point from the road and pressed back against the wet trees and undergrowth, panting and terrified, not daring to move.

A moment, then the steps came on, drew level with her, then passed, and faded away in the distance.

She stood up. She was shaking in every limb as she looked wildly round. Where could she go? She felt desperately that wherever she hid he would find her, his keen eyes would search her out.

Then she heard him coming back, and his steps sounded so sinister and terrifying in the darkness that against her will she gave a little stifled scream as she began to run frantically back the way she had come, seeking vainly on each side for some

opening in the hedge, some gateway through which she might escape.

Her drenched skirts clung about her, hampering every step; she had lost her hat, and her hair was tumbling anyhow about her shoulders.

It seemed to her excited imagination that Asher was close behind her, that he had but to put out his hand to seize hold of her, and she nerved herself to a last desperate effort.

A branch of blackberry caught at her coat, and as she turned to tear herself free, she slipped on a deep rut by the roadside and, twisting her ankle, came heavily to the ground

Chapter III

WHEN Barbara came to herself again she felt the warm glow of a fire upon her face and the gentle touch of hands chafing her own. She lay very still, a painful sense of bewilderment still clouding her mind; then slowly she opened her eyes to a man's face—a face which would have been ugly but for its look of power, crowned by a shock of red hair.

Then she remembered, and the blood rushed in a swift wave to her heart, almost suffocating her, as with a great effort she tried to sit up, only to fall back beneath the pressure of those strong yet gentle hands.

There was an eloquent silence; then Rufus Asher said, grimly:

"That's better. I was beginning to get anxious. Do you often faint like that?"

He seemed to expect no reply to his question, for as he asked it he slipped an arm beneath her head, raising her, at the same time holding a glass to her lips.

"Drink this. You'll feel better."

Barbara pushed his hand away, turning her head aside, and he said again, in the same indescribable tone:

"You need not be afraid. I am not trying to poison you."

It seemed easier to obey than to resist him, and she drank a few drops obediently.

He rose to his feet and stood looking down at her, as she weakly raised herself to a sitting position. But her head felt giddy, and with a little muttered exclamation of impatience, Rufus Asher stooped and lifted her to her feet, putting her gently down again in a deep wicker chair.

Barbara looked around with vague eyes; things were still dreamlike and unreal, but all her life afterwards she remembered her first impression of the queer, low-ceilinged room with its unadorned wooden walls which shone in the flames from the leaping fire.

The floor was of polished wooden boards, with a couple of rough-looking rugs partly concealing it, and an old monk's table ran the length of it, with wooden wheel-backed chairs on either side.

At present there was no light in the room save that which the fire gave out, and outside she could

hear the steady downpouring of the rain and the wind swaying and sighing in tall tree-tops.

Then her eyes came back to his face, and he said again, still with that same note of impatience:

"Well, are you better? That's the worst of a woman, she always faints or goes into hysterics at the wrong moment."

Barbara felt the angry blood whip her cheeks.

"I have never fainted in my life before," she said. "And nothing you can do or say is in the least likely to send me into hysterics."

"Good!" He stooped and threw another log on to the fire. "That being so, I suppose you can listen to what I have to say, Miss Weir?"

"I cannot very well refuse, can I? I suppose the doors are locked."

"As a matter of fact they are not," he answered, coolly. "But all the same I should not advise you to try and get away. You are miles from anywhere here—quite five miles from a village, and off the main road. This hut is known as the Hermit's Hut, and it belongs to a man with whom I once lived in Australia. When he knew that I was coming home he offered to lend it to me, and handed over the keys. I had not seriously thought

of using it until last night—and then it seemed to me the very thing for which I was looking."

Last night! Surely that must have been a hundred thousand years ago, Barbara thought, and sick dread crept once again into her heart. Was this man mad? and was she really so utterly at his mercy? The steady sound of the rain and wind outside seemed to add terror to the strangeness of her surroundings, and with a last spurt of courage she rose to her feet and went to him.

"Mr. Asher—isn't it time the joke was finished?" she asked, and she tried to smile as well as her trembling lips would allow.

"I forgive you for the fright you have given me—I forgive you for everything, and nobody shall ever know, if you'll take me back now. Look what every one will think, what they will say, if they know that you and I have been alone here all this time!" A little frightened breath caught her voice pathetically, but Asher only laughed.

"You apparently had no objection to spending to-night and many other nights with my disreputable brother-in-law," he said, grimly. "Why so particular with me? At least I have the merit of being an unmarried man."

She shrank away from him, her breath coming

fast, her courage gone. It was no joke, and if he was not mad, then he was a greater brute than she had ever dreamt of.

After a moment she forced a question.

"And I am to stay here—how long?"

"Until I am satisfied that you are no longer a menace to my sister's happiness."

"And you will stay here too?"

"Yes."

"You told them you were returning to-morrow."

"I know; but my sister knows how erratic I am, and will think nothing of it when she gets a wire to say that I have changed my mind."

Barbara went back to her chair, and sat staring into the fire.

She could not rid herself of the conviction that this was a dream, and that if she waited patiently enough she would wake up and be able to laugh. When Asher moved across the room to the door she turned her head and looked after him with the curiosity with which one follows people in dreams.

He lifted the latch and let in a swirl of rain and wind, with a spattering of dying leaves swept up from the earth.

"Come here," he said.

Barbara did not move, and he turned and came back to her, taking her by the arm and forcing her to rise. Then he led her to the doorway.

"You see what sort of country we are in," he said; he pointed out into the gathering darkness. As far as the eye could see trees and the wild growth of underwood stretched away on all sides, and except for the drip of the rain and the voice of the wind, there was a profound stillness.

Barbara shivered.

"Shut the door, please shut the door!" she said.

She felt as if she had been shown a glimpse of an enchanted wood; she went back to the fire and held her trembling hands to its warmth.

She heard Asher shut the door and his step across the room; presently he stood behind her.

"What are you thinking, Miss Weir?" he asked.

Barbara raised her face and looked at him silently; then she said:

"I am wondering if you are mad, or if, after all, you are only just a brute!"

The hot blood lashed his face, as if beneath the sting of a whip, but he answered composedly:

"Let us agree that I am a brute; what then?"

"Nothing. I am at your mercy. If you want to kill me, I shall not try and prevent you."

He laughed, and stirred one of the burning logs with his foot, sending a shower of sparks up the wide chimney.

"I did not think you were so melodramatic, Miss Weir," he said. "I have no wish to kill you, or injure you in any way. I am simply keeping you here as a prisoner, as I know of no other way to prevent you from injuring my sister." Barbara's lips moved as if she would have spoken; then she folded them closely together, and he went on: "You told me this morning when we travelled to London together that you were very interested in what I said to you last night about life in Australia. You said that the vast expanses and silences would appeal to you. Well, I am giving them to you here in miniature. We can lead the simple life together, and I will show you how the women do things out there. As a start, perhaps you will help me get the supper. I am hungry, if you are not; we have had no lunch, remember."

Barbara sat back in her chair; the calm authority of his voice roused all the resentment and rebellion of which she was capable.

To be ordered about by him! To be told what to do! To be made to wait on him! Never!

Hungry as she was, she told herself that she would rather die.

After a moment he said again:

"Well, I am waiting."

Barbara managed a scornful laugh.

"You can wait for ever as far as I am concerned. I shall not help you do anything, and I am not hungry."

But though she spoke bravely, her heart was beating fast with apprehension as to what he would do. But he only turned away with a shrug of his big shoulders.

"Very well. You will be the sufferer, not I."

For some time he moved to and fro from a big cupboard in a corner to the monk's table, and presently the appetizing smell of frying eggs and ham rose from a pan which he had placed on the wood fire.

He had made some tea, and the boiling kettle sang soothingly on the hob, sending a long spout of steam into the room.

Barbara felt that she would have given her soul for a cup of tea, but she was too proud to ask, and presently he laid the table with a small cloth he found stowed away in a drawer, and drew two chairs up to it.

"You will not change your mind and join me?" he asked. "I can promise you that the cooking is quite good. I am used to getting my own meals."

She turned her head away, her hands clasped fast in her lap.

"I am not hungry."

"Very well." He shrugged his shoulders and sat down to table. "I know you are hungry. I know that you would give anything in the world for a cup of tea, only you think you are paying me out by refusing to take anything. You are quite wrong: you are only punishing yourself. I shall enjoy my meal whether you sit there like a martyr or not."

She made no answer; she kept her eyes fixed steadily on the fire, but she was faint with emotion and hunger, and she had to keep her teeth clenched to prevent herself from bursting into tears.

She tried hard to think of something else—of last night; of the moonlit garden and the sound of the gramophone:

And men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives—
You'd never know that old home-town of mine!

A dream!—this must be a dream! She would wake presently and find herself in Linda's house, without this terrible sense of fear and loneliness.

How absurd to think that Asher could really be such a brute! He had always been kind; she had always liked him. Why, only last night in the garden something in his quiet voice and the steadiness of his eyes had held her spellbound as she walked beside him in the moonlight, and now—she half turned her head to look at him as he sat at the table in the firelight—a huge, grotesque figure with the pot of tea and the appetizing dish of ham and eggs sizzling before him. She tried to speak, she thought she managed a few words, then suddenly the floor of the room seemed to rise up and hit her between the eyes.

An unromantic dash of cold water brought her back to consciousness again, and Asher's irritable voice.

"This is what comes of being so pig-headed and obstinate," he was saying. "If you'd been sensible and had something to eat, this wouldn't have happened. Now then, no more nonsense, please! Drink this tea——"

Barbara burst into a wild fit of sobbing.

Her last reserve of strength had gone, and she

felt herself beaten; she sobbed frantically, shaking from head to foot with the storm of emotion, and Asher let her alone. He went over to the window and stood staring out into the darkness until she was quieter, then he came back.

"I am sorry you are so upset," he said, impartially. "But all the time I can only remember that if I had not brought you here with me my sister would be in worse distress now than you are."

He watched her silently as she tried to wipe her eyes on a small handkerchief, which was already sodden, then suddenly he laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Please stop crying!" he commanded. "I hate to see a woman cry. If you'd done as I told you, and had some tea, this would never have happened. Now—are you going to be sensible?"

She raised her drowned eyes to his face.

"I'll n—never forgive you for this," she panted.

"Time enough to refuse when I ask for forgiveness," he said, hardily. "Look! I'll pull the table up to you. Now then, drink this tea."

She was too exhausted to refuse, and she ate and drank obediently, till slowly warmth and strength came back to her body, and with them her natural pluck.

She felt ashamed because she had fainted, ashamed because she had cried. That was not the way to deal with such a man! She must fight him with his own weapons; bring indifference with which to meet indifference.

She knew that he was watching her critically.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you." She pushed back her chair and rose. "Shall I help you wash up?—or is there —I suppose there's nobody in the house to help?"

"Nobody. We shall have to wait upon ourselves."

She tried to laugh.

"Well, if you can do the cooking, I dare say I can manage the housework."

She cleared the table, carrying the tea things into the little kitchen place at the back. It all smelt damp and unaired, and she shivered as she looked up the tiny, narrow staircase, and wondered what the rooms were like above.

She had fetched hot water from the kettle and begun to wash the crockery when Asher appeared beside her. He had taken off his coat, and rolled up his shirt-sleeves.

"I'm going to get some more wood," he said, bluntly. "The house is damp, and we shall have

to have fires everywhere. I'll bring your boxes in from the car."

She remembered the presence of her luggage with a shock of gratitude. When presently she saw the familiar boxes standing in the room she felt as if she had suddenly discovered old friends. When Asher left her to fetch the wood she went over to the large trunk that held her frocks, and sat down on it with a greater feeling of security.

After all, she had got to make the best of things. They would be bound to miss her before long; the people at the hotel where she had taken a room would wonder; Edmund would wonder; then, at the thought of him, the hot colour rushed to her face.

To think that their conversation had been overheard, and by Rufus Asher! She hid her face in her hands for a moment, and tried to recollect what they had said, but everything seemed to have escaped her memory. She went back to the kitchen, finished the washing up, and tidied as best she could; then she sat down by the fire again.

Her headache had gone, and she felt better; she looked almost like her old self when Asher rejoined her.

He stacked up the dying fire, and stood looking at her.

"Tired?"

"No."

But try as she would, she could not keep the flicker of panic from her eyes, or prevent her lips from trembling, and there was a poignant silence till he said again:

"You're frightened of me, I know, and I'm sorry. I never meant to frighten you, and you've no cause to fear me. You called me a brute just now, and perhaps I am a brute, but even a brute can behave like a gentleman sometimes, Miss Weir!"

She rose to her feet, her hands clutching the arms of the chair, a wild hope in her eyes.

"Then—you will let me go?" she asked, breathlessly.

His face softened.

"I am sorry, that is the one thing I will not do."

He stooped and gathered up an armful of wood.

"Your room is upstairs. I will make a fire for you and take up your boxes."

Barbara took a step towards him.

"And how long do I stay here?"

"I told you. Until I am satisfied that you are no longer a danger to my sister's happiness."

"And then? What becomes of me then?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Then you will be free to go. Then you can do as you like," he said. He turned away, and she heard his heavy steps ascending the stairs and presently in the room overhead.

He had left the outer door open, and she walked to it and stood looking into the wet night. It was quite dark now, and the air was filled with the humid smell of wet earth and dripping trees.

There was not a sound to be heard, until suddenly the shrill, mournful cry of an owl cleft the silence.

Barbara shuddered and went back to the fire.

Asher had told her that it would be useless to try and escape; well—supposing she no longer had the wish to escape?

Her cheeks burned with sudden excitement as she knelt down and held her hands to the glowing logs.

To make him suffer, to punish him as he had punished her, that was the one desire of her heart; but how? How?

Then suddenly she remembered words which he had spoken to her during that terrible journey down here through the rain.

"For my sins I once loved a woman like that——"

A sudden throb of passionate excitement and exultation swept through her. She had attracted him from the moment of their first meeting, she had known it before ever he admitted it to her; well, for his sins he should love again! He should love her!

Chapter IV

IT seemed a long time to Barbara before she heard Asher's step on the stairs. When at last he came into the room she did not turn round.

"I've had the devil of a job," he broke out, irritably. "The chimney must have been damp or something, and when I got the fire to light, half a ton of soot came down, and smothered everything."

Barbara turned round, a little malicious smile in her eyes.

"I thought you liked roughing it and leading the simple life?" she said, unsympathetically, then suddenly she broke into unrestrained laughter. "Oh, you look like a chimney-sweep!"

Asher flushed beneath the grime that streaked his face.

"I'm not used to grates," he answered, gruffly. "An open hearth and an armful of wood make a good enough fire where I come from."

He disappeared into the kitchen, and she heard

the sound of splashing water. After a moment he came back.

"You know, the more you tell me about Australia the more I wonder that you ever came back to England," Barbara said. She was sitting by the fire, one foot resting on the kerb, the light from the flames playing about her. "If I loved any place as much as you seem to have loved the back of beyond, or wherever it was, I should never have left it for this climate. Look at the world outside to-night, for instance."

He crossed the room and stood beside her, his eyes searching her face suspiciously.

"Why are you so suddenly friendly to me?" he asked. "If you think you can get over me like that, Miss Weir——"

Barbara laughed, though her cheeks flushed at the veiled insult of his words.

"I'm growing sensible," she said, quietly. "I quite realize that it's useless to try and pit my strength against yours, so I'm going to make the best of it."

"For the moment, I suppose, and then seize the first opportunity of running away; is that it?"

She shook her head.

"No, I shall not run away. As a matter of fact,

I think I shall rather like being here when we've had a week or two of it."

She could have laughed at her own bravely spoken words.

A week or two! When her only longing was to get away from the isolation and dreariness, and the voice of the wind in the trees.

Asher answered, grimly: "I was once told that when a woman shows friendliness to a man she dislikes it is time to beware of her."

She raised her eyes.

"I don't dislike you. Until to-night I liked you very much."

The faintest quiver twisted his mouth.

"Without wishing to be rude, I do not flatter myself that that is the truth, Miss Weir."

She looked at him quietly.

"It is, I assure you—ask Edmund. I——" She stopped, and bit her lip, realizing that she had made a mistake to mention that name, and for a moment neither of them spoke; then Barbara said again: "There is one thing you may not have thought of, Mr. Asher, or perhaps you have thought of it, and do not care."

"What do you mean?"

She met his gaze unfalteringly.

"I mean that by bringing me here and staying here yourself you are putting me in an impossible position. If people knew——"

He interrupted ruthlessly.

"Is it any worse to be here alone with me than it would have been elsewhere with Edmund Hyde? As I said before, at least I have the merit of being an unmarried man."

Barbara rose to her feet, such a wave of bitter revolt swept through her heart that she could hardly trust herself to speak, then with a great effort she managed to smile.

"You think yourself very clever, Mr. Asher," she said. "Perhaps some day I shall be able to show you that the winning cards are really in my hands all the time."

He bowed stiffly.

"I shall be most happy if you can convince me now. Why wait until some far-away moment?"

She looked at him with pity in her eyes; he was so strong and determined, with his hard eyes and the heavy lines in his face, and her own words flashed again through her mind:

"A man without a heart! A man without a heart!"

"A penny for your thoughts, Miss Weir!" he said.

Their eyes met, and held one another's challengingly, then Barbara said, defiantly:

"I was remembering that even Samson was broken in the end—by a woman." He fell back a step from her but he made no reply, and she said again: "I am tired. If there is nothing else I can do for you, I should like to go upstairs and see if I can find a place amongst the soot where I can sleep."

But in spite of what Asher had said the soot seemed to be a negligible quantity; the fire was roaring up the chimney, and Asher had dragged all the bedding and clothes from the bed and piled them in front of the fire to air.

Barbara shut the door and locked it, then she looked around her.

The room was low-ceilinged and raftered, like the one downstairs, with a similar floor of polished boards, and curtains of dull-blue chintz pulled across the small casement window.

The furniture was of the plainest: a narrow wooden bedstead, a Queen Anne chest of drawers on which stood an old mirror, and a couple of brass candlesticks very discoloured through lack of clean-

ing; a corner washstand with a blue jug and basin, and an old-fashioned heavy wardrobe stood against the farthest wall.

Asher had brought up her luggage and unstrapped it, but Barbara felt too tired and dispirited to attempt any unpacking; she just dragged forward the one armchair the room boasted, and, leaning her chin on her hand, stared into the crackling fire.

Downstairs she could hear Asher moving about, and the sound of his step seemed to intensify the silence and her own loneliness.

It was like a dream or some preposterous story to think that she was here in the heart of an unknown wood with nobody for miles around but a man who was almost a stranger to her, and in spite of her determination she again began to cast about in her mind for some means to elude him, some way of escape.

She thought of Linda's house with a throb of heartsickness. Could it be only last night that she had felt so safe and secure? She kicked off her slippers and tip-toed to the window, pulling aside the chintz curtains. With careful fingers she unlatched the window and leaned out, but there was no sound save the wind and the incessant drop,

dropping of rain, and a ground mist prevented her from seeing anything at all, except the dull glow of the light from the room below.

She shut the window with a little shiver and went back to the fire. Nothing to be done to-night, that was sure! She could only wait for the morning.

She could still hear Asher downstairs, his cough, and once the tap of his pipe on the hearth-tiles, as he knocked out its ashes.

She listened, and presently she heard him whistling, a soft little snatch of tune that seemed somehow familiar, though at first she could not place it; then suddenly she knew:

And men who've stayed home all their lives,
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives—
You'd never know that old home-town of mine——

She wondered if he was whistling it purposely for her to hear, or if it was inadvertence. And a queer sort of pity for him rose in her heart. She had called him a "brute," and a "man without a heart," and it seemed now as if all the time he was nothing but a headstrong, wilful boy, who was trying in vain to fashion the world to his own liking.

She wanted to hate him, but it seemed impossible, and it was with a deep pity in her heart that presently she fell asleep in the arm-chair, with the comforting glow of the fire on her face.

She slept like that until morning, dreamlessly and deeply, to waken to the realization that she was cold, and to the feeling of sunshine in the room.

She started up with a gasp, and for a moment stood staring round her, not realizing where she was; then suddenly she knew.

The night had gone, and she was safe! A deep sigh of thankfulness escaped her.

She found her watch, and saw that it was not yet six; but it was light outside, and when she drew aside the curtains she gave a cry of pleasure. The little house seemed like a fairy cottage built in the heart of a wood, and the sun was shining on leaves that were already touched with the faint, indefinable change of autumn, and shading the deep bracken and undergrowth with golden light.

She opened her window, and drew in a breath of the wonderful air—it seemed to be laden with all the scents of nature—and she closed her eyes with a feeling of intoxication.

She felt that she knew now what Asher had

meant when he said that he longed for the country and the primitive life he had lived for so many years, and it flashed into her mind how different was this morning's awakening from the one she had planned in London, in airless streets and the solemn breathlessness of an hotel.

She washed in the little blue basin on the corner washstand, changed the travelling frock she had worn yesterday for a blue and white cotton, very simply made, and re-dressed her hair, then she softly unlocked the door and slipped downstairs.

Wherever Asher was sleeping, he was not yet awake, for dead ashes filled the hearth in the sitting-room, and the curtains were still drawn.

She pulled them back and opened the window; then she unbolted the front door and stepped out into the wood.

Again she thought of the fairy story of the enchanted cottage which a wandering child found in the heart of a wood, as she stood on the crazy pathway almost completely overgrown with grass and moss, and looked up at the little house. A rose which climbed over its front door had been heavily dashed with last night's storm, and a great branch of clematis had broken away from the side of the house, and trailed disconsolately in the mud.

The window-frames needed painting, and the small garden was overgrown and neglected, but the thought leapt to Barbara's mind, "I can make it look a picture"; then she laughed at herself for the thought. Why should she take an interest in the place which was virtually her prison? All her plans should be of how she could escape.

She went back into the house and lit the fire; then she hunted about till she found brooms and swept and dusted the sitting-room.

In the kitchen she came across a pair of large and muddy boots flung anyhow into a corner, and a little twinkle came into her eyes as she stood looking at them.

She remembered vaguely hearing a distant thud last night, no doubt when Asher had thrown them down; and after a moment she picked them up, and carrying them out on to the doorstep, found a blunt knife and scraped most of the congealed mud from them; then she cleaned them as well as she could and stood them by the fire.

There was still no sign of Asher, but a hunt round revealed the car which had brought them last night sheltered in a tumble-down shed at the back of the cottage. But for its presence she

would still have been inclined to believe it all a dream.

She picked an armful of bracken, and the few flowers she could find, and was arranging them in an earthenware jar in the sitting-room when she heard a step in the narrow passage outside, and Asher walked into the room.

The colour mounted to Barbara's face, but she smiled and nodded brightly.

"Good morning! You're lazy! I've been up ever so long. Breakfast would have been ready, only I can't find it. Where do we keep the pantry?"

He looked at her grimly, then the old suspicion flashed back into his mind.

"Have you been out?" he demanded.

"Naturally. Can't you see that I've picked these?" She indicated the ferns and flowers. "And let me tell you," she went on, briskly, before he could speak, "that I think you've chosen a perfectly lovely spot. I could live here and be quite happy for ever."

He made no answer, but turned on his heel, and Barbara called after him:

"One other thing. If I'm to do the housekeep-

ing and keep the place clean, kindly don't leave your dirty boots all over the place. I've got the worst of the dirt off for you this time, but in future you can do it yourself; that's fair, isn't it?"

His face darkened.

"I did not ask you to clean my boots."

She smiled in friendly fashion.

"I know, but you would have done, I expect; so I forestalled you. However, it's the last time. You can do all those sort of jobs—you can clean mine as well. I'll give them to you after breakfast. And we want some more wood chopped, and there's a creeper to nail up."

His face relaxed slightly.

"Anything else?" he demanded.

"Not for the moment, except that I should like to know where the pantry is."

"I'll show you."

She followed him to the little kitchen, and he showed her an old-fashioned cupboard behind the door, which she had overlooked.

"There wasn't time to get in much food," he apologized. "But there are bacon and eggs, and bread and butter, and stuff like that. We can get anything else we want to-day."

"Oh! Then we are near a town?"

"We are five miles away."

"I see." She asked no more questions but set about getting the breakfast, and presently they were facing one another across the trestle table, eating with good appetites.

"If people didn't know," Barbara said, airily, "they might think that we were an ideally happy honeymoon couple." He made no answer, and she said with a note of exasperation: "If we've got to stay here for an indefinite time, Mr. Asher, I think the least you can do is to be polite, and *try* to make conversation!"

He looked at her steadily.

"Are you trying to play a game with me, Miss Weir?"

She shook her head, passing the butter.

"You've got no butter. No, I'm not trying to play any game. Last night I thought of all sorts of wild schemes for escaping. I was frightened—I admit it! But now——"

"Now?" he repeated, as she paused.

"Now I'm quite happy." She dropped a second knob of sugar into his tea. "I'm willing to stay as long as ever you like."

Their eyes met across the table, then he said:

"Well, that's a very sensible decision to have

come to, Miss Weir, because I'm afraid it will be some time before you can be allowed to go back to—all that you have left."

"I'm quite happy," Barbara said again, but her heart felt cold with apprehension.

Chapter V

IT was much later on in the morning that Asher came to her as she was sitting at the open front door looking into the wood.

"I want you to write a letter for me."

She turned.

"A letter? To whom?"

"To my sister."

Her face paled; she rose to her feet.

"To Linda?" she faltered.

"Yes, why not?" He saw her agitation, and it gave him a cruel pleasure. "Isn't it usual to write to your hostess after you have left her house, to thank her for her hospitality? Or is that another of the customs you have disposed of?"

She hesitated, then she said quietly:

"What do you wish me to say?"

"If you come in, I will tell you."

She followed him back into the room, and he put paper and ink on the table.

"Shall I write from this address?" she asked.

"You can put the name of the hotel where you

intended staying. Just write an ordinary letter —you know what to say without my telling you." He held the pen to her, and Barbara sat down obediently.

She dashed off a few lines, and held them up for his inspection.

"Will that do?"

He read them carefully.

"Thank you, that will do quite well. Now she will not wonder why you have not written, and nobody will worry."

Barbara laughed.

"If that is all your concern, the letter need not go," she said. "I have nobody in the world who will lose a moment's sleep on my account."

He looked at her.

"Except my worthy brother-in-law, I suppose?"

The colour flickered into her cheeks, and died down again.

"Oh, Edmund—poor Edmund!" she said, with a note of pain in her voice.

Asher's face was ugly as he turned away, the letter in his hand.

"I wonder if there is a decent woman to be found in the whole of England to-day," he said, savagely.

There followed two long days of monotony for Barbara. The momentary gleam of sunshine had faded after a few hours, and a steady downpour of rain succeeded it. Grey skies, sodden earth, and the steady drip, drip from the trees all around the little house enwrapped it like an impenetrable veil.

In spite of her attempts to establish her strange relationship with Asher on a friendly basis, he remained taciturn and almost silent, except when necessity compelled him to speak to her, and at the end of the third day Barbara began to feel that she could stand the strain of her position no longer. There was so little to do in the house once the meals were cooked and cleared away, and the hours dragged terribly.

Asher spent most of his time in the ragged garden outside the house, regardless of the inclement weather. He cleaned the car, and tidied the old barn which served as its temporary garage, and chopped stacks of wood, until Barbara asked him with an hysterical laugh if he intended to remain there for the rest of his life.

He paused for a moment, and straightened his back, looking at her from beneath scowling brows.

"It's something to do," he answered, laconically. "One must pass the time somehow."

"Is that how you feel too?" she asked. "What about me, then? Don't you think the days seem like world without end, amen, to me?" In her eagerness she came a step nearer to him, the colour rising in her face. "Oh, Mr. Asher, isn't this joke played out?" she urged, breathlessly. "Can't we shake hands and go back to the world? I promise you, I give you my word of honour—that I will never tell a soul, never, never, how you have treated me."

Asher stooped and picked up another log.

"Your *'word of honour'?"* he said, cuttingly.

She fell back with a choked little cry, her hands clenched, then she laughed. After all, what did it matter? Things could not continue like this for ever, even if he were mad. Surely some day somebody would make inquiries for her and help would come.

It was just a matter of being patient, just for a little longer. But she knew she was almost at the end of her tether, and that only her strong will kept her up.

On the fourth morning the rain stopped, and a watery sun struggled out of the clouds.

Barbara felt hope rising in her heart as she opened the front door and looked into the wet heart of the woods surrounding them.

She told herself once more that the whole situation was preposterous, and could not possibly be happening; was she such a weakling that she must tamely submit to the will of this man? As she moved about preparing breakfast her thoughts were busy with her endless scheming and plotting.

They could not be far from a village or a main road; she did not believe they were as isolated as Asher had declared; sometimes lying awake at night she was sure she could hear the distant sound of traffic, and once the scream of a motor siren.

"A penny for your thoughts, Miss Weir," Asher said at her shoulder, and she came back to the present with a start, to realize that the kettle had boiled over, and that she was standing with the empty teapot in her hand staring out into the rugged garden.

"I was dreaming," she said, a little break in her voice. "I was wondering if you would have dared to do this thing to me if I had had any one, any people of my own, who cared what became of me."

He shrugged his shoulders and sat down at the table.

"I thought we had done with such arguments," he said, impatiently. "I thought you were reconciled."

She faced him with flashing eyes.

"You thought you had broken me in, you mean," she accused him. "Well, you will see."

Asher spread some butter on his toast with aggravating precision.

"You are threatening to run away?" he asked, coolly.

"You mean that when I give you the opportunity you will take it? Well, you will have it to-day."

Her eyes widened with pathetic eagerness.

"To-day?"

He went on in the same level voice:

"I am going to London this morning, and I shall not be back until late. You will have eight or nine hours entirely to yourself. Your jailer will be miles away, and you will be quite free to do exactly as you please."

She caught her breath with a quivering sound of incredulity.

"You mean that I may go?" But though she

asked the question she had no real confidence; this was some fresh scheme of his, some new game with which to torture her.

"You may go if you wish, certainly," he answered. "What is there to stop you? If you follow the path opposite this house through the wood, it will take you out on to a main road two miles away, and the rest will be easy."

She watched him with fascinated eyes; she wanted to believe him, and yet she dared not. After a moment she asked a sharp question.

"And then if I go, what then?"

Asher looked across the table at her.

"If I come back here to-night and find that you have gone," he said, in a voice of flint, "I shall seek out that precious brother-in-law of mine and shoot him as I would a dog."

There was a tragic silence. Barbara had gone white to the lips, and the eagerness of her eyes had changed to unutterable weariness. She knew that he spoke the truth; she knew that he would keep his word; she knew that no consideration for her, or his sister, or Edmund Hyde, would prevent him from carrying out his threat.

It was, as she had thought, just a new torture which he had planned for her. Nominally she

would be free for the whole day, and she would never dare take advantage of her freedom.

Asher finished his breakfast and rose to his feet. He never stood on ceremony, he did exactly as he pleased; he treated her as if she were a paid servant whose feelings he had not to consider in the slightest.

"You can please yourself what you do," he said again. "But I shall keep my word."

He walked out of the room, leaving her alone at the table, and she sat there for a long time, her thoughts in a whirl, burning with a resentment which she dared not show.

Presently he came back; he wore his overcoat and carried his hat in his hand.

Barbara looked at him.

"Why don't you put your hat on?" she asked, mockingly. "You are not generally so respectful."

He ignored her words.

"I shall be back about eight," he said, and waited, but she did not speak, and he added significantly: "If you are not here——" and waited again.

Barbara spoke as well as her trembling lips would permit.

"I shall be here."

He went away through the wet woods, where the sunlight made shimmering, fantastic shadows, and she was left alone.

Once Asher's presence was removed, common sense began to reassert itself in Barbara's mind. Why did she allow herself to be bullied and overruled by him? He was nothing but a brute and a coward; a braggart, too, in all probability. He knew that she was afraid of him, and so made his threats.

She rose presently, and mechanically began to clear away the breakfast things. She took them into the little kitchen, and put them down on the table, but further work seemed impossible. Why should she clean the house for him? Why should she do anything that he expected of her?

She took her hat and went out into the wood, leaving the door of the house wide open behind her. The air was chilly after the recent heavy rain, but it was fresh and sweet, and, as she walked along, the panic and fear in her mind died away. She reminded herself that she had only to be patient for a little longer, that something must happen soon to release her from her present position.

Mechanically she followed the footpath which ran away at right angles from the little house, and presently she came to the main road of which Asher had spoken, a broad, smooth road which ran into the east like a strained ribbon across a board of undulating green, dotted with clumps of bell heather.

Which way did London lie, she wondered, with a dreadful feeling of home-sickness, as she stood looking first to the right and then to the left.

A fast car came rushing up the road, driven by a man in livery, and a wild impulse came to Barbara to stop him, and tell him of her plight and beg him to take her away. Almost she had lifted her hand, then the memory of Asher's hard eyes checked her. He had meant what he said; he was not a man to make an idle threat. The car sped on, and was lost to sight over the hill.

Barbara turned and went back through the wet woods to the cottage.

She washed up the breakfast things and tidied the room, then hunted through her luggage for a book she had begun to read and had left unfinished, and drawing up a chair to the fire sat down.

But she could not concentrate her thoughts; they kept roaming away to the life from which

Rufus Asher had cut her off so summarily. What was every one doing, and where had Asher himself gone?

The silence all around seemed almost like a living presence that was watching her with eyes of suspicion, and for the first time it occurred to her that perhaps after all Asher had not really gone to London; that he was somewhere close by, perhaps even at that moment he was watching her.

She put down her book and went to the window, but there was not a sound or a sign of any living presence, and she laughed at herself for the thought. The cheap clock on the mantelshelf struck three, and she was startled to find it was so late. She had had no lunch, and she went into the kitchen to get some, more for something to do than because she was hungry.

The sunshine was fading, and the sky growing overcast again. The wind was rising and the trees were swaying agitatedly over the little house.

A thrill of nervous dread went through Barbara's heart.

Supposing Asher did not return that night? Supposing he left her alone through the long hours? She found herself suddenly longing for him; she would have given the world for the sound

of his heavy step, or the sight of his grim, unsmiling face.

If only he would come back! She feared him less than she feared the loneliness and silence.

She ate her lunch with scant appetite, and tried to settle to the book again, but it was impossible.

Four o'clock! No ray of sunshine left now, and even the wind had dropped suddenly as if to give place to some force greater than itself.

Four hours, perhaps more, to get through before he came back. How could she bear them!

A sudden idea came to her. She would put on her hat and coat and go through the woods to meet him. Out on the main road she would not feel so lost and frightened, it was the solemnity and darkness of the woods that terrified her.

She ran upstairs for her coat, and was taking it down from its peg on the wall, when there came a knocking on the front door below.

Barbara stood still, her head turned to listen.

Asher! Her thoughts leapt to the wild hope, even while she recognized its improbability. He would not knock, he knew well enough that the door would not be bolted against him. Who then could it be?

She felt her heart beating up in her throat and

her hands turned cold as she crept to the head of the little staircase and peered over the rail.

And then the knocking came again, louder and with more confidence, as if whoever was without suspected that the house was empty.

If only she had bolted the door! In a moment perhaps the intruder would try the handle, and then——

She nerved herself to action; she even forced herself to hum a snatch of song as she went down the narrow staircase with as much noise as she could make, and, nerving herself to a supreme effort, opened the door.

A man stood there in the fading sunlight, a short, thick-set man in a shabby overcoat, and with a cap pulled down over his eyes.

He looked surprised when he saw Barbara, and after a momentary blank stare, began to speak in a mumbling, apologetic tone.

"Beg pardon, lady, but I've lost my way. If you could tell me which is the road."

He spoke civilly enough, and Barbara gained courage; she pointed to the footpath.

"That takes you to the main road—about a mile away," and she made a movement to shut the door, but the man came a step nearer.

"I haven't had anything to eat to-day, lady, and I was out all last night in the rain," and as he spoke his eyes were going past her searchingly, as if to ascertain if there were other people besides in the cottage.

Barbara hesitated, then she said as firmly as she could:

"If you stay there I will fetch you some food," and with a swift movement she shut the door and bolted it.

Then she turned to the kitchen and was surprised to find how she was trembling.

After all, the man was respectful enough, and perhaps he was really hungry. She made up a parcel of bread and cheese and some cold meat, and went back to the door, but this time she kept the chain up when she opened it, as she said:

"There you are. You will find your way along the footpath quite easily." And she shut and bolted the door again.

She went back to the sitting-room and peered through the window, and after some moments she saw the man walking slowly away.

But before he reached the bend which led into the heart of the wood he turned and looked back

at the house, with a queer searching expression in his eyes that turned her cold.

She went the round of the little house after that, shutting all the windows and doors, and pulling the curtains, although it was still quite light; then she made up the fire into a roaring blaze and sat down beside it; but her strained nerves imagined footsteps in the wood at every moment, and the sound of that muffled knocking on the outer door.

She did not dare to go to meet Asher, but every nerve seemed strained to him in a passionate prayer to come back, to come back quickly, and not to leave her to this nerve-racking solitude.

Five o'clock! Half-past! The hands of the clock seemed to crawl.

She leaned forward and threw another log on to the fire; then she rose and tiptoed to the window, drawing aside an edge of curtain to peer out into the gathering dusk.

The woods looked eerie and haunted, and the trees towered skywards like watching giants, but there was no sign of Asher along the crooked foot-path—no sign of that other man whose last searching glance still lingered in her heart, a terrifying memory.

Six o'clock! She went into the kitchen to busy

herself with the supper. It would be something to do, something to occupy her thoughts; and then, as she stood there, fumbling in the darkness to find candles and matches, a crash of thunder split the silence.

Barbara gave a smothered scream and dropped the matches, spilling them all over the floor; then with a nervous laugh she went down on her knees, groping through the growing darkness to gather them up.

A storm! This then was the meaning of the sudden dropping of the wind and the breathless silence. She tumbled to her feet again, her hands filled with the loose matches, and at that moment a flash of lightning lit the little kitchen and showed her with appalling clearness the outline of a man's head and shoulders against the white cotton blind of the window.

The vivid flash of lightning vanished, and left her once more in the darkness, the unstruck match in her hand, and her heart beating so fast with fear that she thought she would choke.

The man who had knocked at the cottage door that afternoon had come back. Somehow she had known that he would do so, had been expecting him during the last dragging hours, although she

had so gallantly tried to shut the thought from her heart.

And for this she had only Rufus Asher to thank. Whatever happened to her to-night would be his fault alone, and she told herself passionately that he was a brute and a coward.

The thunder crashed again, and with a little shudder she covered her ears with her hands.

Where could she go? What could she do? She was alone in this place, miles from a living soul, with the exception of that sinister presence out there in the storm.

What did he want? She dared not asked herself. She only knew that if he broke into the house she would be powerless.

She crept back to the front sitting-room, still grasping the candlestick in her shaking hand; it seemed less lonely with the light and warmth of the fire about her; but she was cold from head to foot, and the beating of her heart was like a hammer in the silence.

She stood in the centre of the room, her strained eyes fixed on the curtained window.

Where was the man now? How soon would he try to break in? And which way would he make the attempt?

Would Asher never come? What was he made of that he could leave her alone with this terror? She wished with all her soul that she had defied his threat and made her escape; it seemed now the height of folly that she had not done so; and yet she knew that he would have kept his word and shot Edmund Hyde.

Edmund!—and at the thought of him, the tears rose in her eyes with passionate longing.

What would he say if he knew what was happening to her? She remembered the good-natured way in which he had always spoken of his brother-in-law.

"He's queer, of course, but he's all right, really!"

He would not think so now, if he knew what she had suffered at Asher's hands during the past five days.

A burning log fell from the grate to the open hearth, and as Barbara moved forward to pick it up with the tongs, she heard a faint, indefinable sound at the front door.

She stood quite still, every nerve in her body stiffened, till she felt as if she would never be able to move again, and her face felt icy cold as if a breath of wintry wind had passed by.

The noise came again, more insistently, as if the man outside was losing patience.

Barbara made a desperate effort and spoke.

"Who is there?"

The sound of her own voice gave her courage, the beating of her heart grew quieter; after all, perhaps there was nothing to fear; if it was only money he wanted. . . . There was no answer to her cry and she looked desperately round the room for some weapon with which to defend herself, but there was nothing.

The tongs—the poker—they were frail and would be useless if she was ever driven to use them. Then suddenly she remembered that Asher had once told her he carried a revolver.

Had he taken it with him? Or was it still in his room?

Fresh hope flooded her heart; she caught up the lamp and ran out of the room and upstairs to the little back room where Asher slept.

She was trembling with hope and eagerness as she hurriedly searched round.

His portmanteau stood empty in one corner, some clothes were thrown untidily across the bed, one drawer in the small painted chest stood partly open, as if it was too full to shut properly.

She dragged it open with impatient hands, and searched under the litter of ties and collars and handkerchiefs, but found nothing!

A photograph of Linda in a small, folded, leather case lay uppermost, staring at her with serious eyes, and Barbara pushed it impatiently away.

Downstairs she could hear the man knocking on the door; once above the sound of the wind and pouring rain she thought she heard his voice.

She felt desperate, she looked round the room with wild eyes.

The revolver! If only she could find it! . . . Her eyes fell on the iron bedstead behind the door.

Perhaps it was under the pillow. She was across the room in a flash.

She could have sobbed with relief when her fingers touched the cold steel barrel, she laughed aloud as with it in her hand she went back again down the narrow staircase, leaving the lamp behind her in Asher's room.

It was quite dark in the passage below save for the glow of the fire from the front room, but now she was no longer afraid, as, with the revolver clutched tightly in her hand, she moved towards the front door.

"Who is there and what do you want?"

"Open the door."

"I will open the door if you will tell me your name and what you want."

She thought she heard a man's laugh, and then his body's heavy weight was thrust against the door. The hinges strained and creaked, but held firmly, and the voice outside said again:

"Open the door, or I shall break it down," and when she made no reply, a second thrust came once more in brutal determination.

She spoke as steadily as her throbbing heart would permit. "Very well—I will open it."

There was a second of silence, then she pulled back the chain and the bolt.

The door swung in with sudden violence, bringing with it a swirl of rain and wet leaves. She was conscious of a man's lumbering form, and hardly knowing what she did, Barbara raised the revolver and fired.

And then for a moment she went mad; with her nerve gone completely she flung the little shining weapon from her and screamed, hiding her face in her shaking hands, as she ran back into the fire-lit room, her arms raised above her head to ward off the blow she expected.

"Don't hurt me—don't hurt me——"

She heard a man's steps in the room, and felt his rough hands upon her, dragging her to her feet; then through all her terror and panic, a voice reached her fading consciousness, a blunt, almost angry voice which she recognized with a little gasping sob of relief unbelievable.

"Barbara, in God's name what is it?—what on earth has happened?"

And she looked up into Asher's face.

For a second she stared at him, her eyes wild with a hope to which she dared not give credence; then, with a little hysterical cry she flung herself against him, clinging to him, hardly conscious of what she was doing or saying.

"I thought you would never come, I thought you did not mean to come back any more; and there was a man—he tried to get in—I saw him at the kitchen window—he came once this afternoon—and I was so terrified—oh, it was cruel of you, cruel to leave me here! Don't go away again—don't leave me any more or I shall die. . . . Please, please, don't leave me here!"

She was sobbing wildly, and shaking so that she would have fallen but for the clasp of his arm, and for some moments he let her cry, then he put her into a chair.

"There is nothing to be frightened of, there is nobody here but me. If you will let me go for a moment I will get you something to drink."

His voice was kind, but impartial; he gave in with a little shrug when Barbara still clung to his hand; her eyes went past him fearfully to the open door as she said again incoherently:

"There was a man—I saw him—and he tried to get in. He came this afternoon first; he knew I was alone—oh, don't let him hurt me——"

Asher spoke again with quiet patience.

"There is nobody here to hurt you. Let me go a moment, and I will shut the door."

Her eyes searched his face suspiciously.

"You're not going away, you're not going to leave me again?"

"On my word of honour, no!"

She gave a little broken laugh at that.

"Your word of honour!—you didn't believe in mine."

But she released him, and he went back and shut and fastened the door, coming into the room again with the revolver in his hand.

"Where did you find this?"

"Under your pillow. I meant to kill him if he got in."

He gave a short laugh.

"Yes, you certainly shot to kill." He put the little weapon into his pocket. "Now, do you feel better?"

"Yes."

"Sit still then, and I will get you something to eat and drink."

"I don't want anything."

"Don't you? Well, I do!"

There was no apology for her fright; he was perfectly indifferent and self-controlled.

Barbara lay back in the chair and closed her eyes; her stampeded nerves were steadier, and she began to feel ashamed of her breakdown.

What a coward he must have thought her!

When presently he came back with a clumsily laid supper-tray she looked at him with hot, angry eyes.

"It's your fault I made such a fool of myself. I'm not generally so silly. It's all your fault and the strain of the past week."

He made no answer, he began to set the table with a man's awkwardness, and in spite of her asseveration that she was not hungry, Barbara found herself eating with something of an appetite.

The rain had stopped, and everything seemed very still once more, and looking at Asher's imperturbable face in the firelight, it seemed that this day of loneliness and dread had never really been.

When she rose to take the supper things away, he stopped her.

"There is no need to do that yet. There is something I want you to do for me first."

Words of refusal rose to her lips, she hated him for his indifference and self-possession; she began to say that she had no intention of doing anything for him again as long as she lived, when something in his face checked the words.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

Asher smiled grimly.

"I would not ask you, but, unfortunately, I cannot do it myself."

He began with difficulty to pull off his coat, which, she noticed for the first time, was sodden through and through with the heavy rainstorm.

"I've got the bullet intended for your gentleman friend in my shoulder," he said, whimsically.

Barbara stared at him, her lips parted, her eyes wide.

"The bullet—in your shoulder——" she whis-

pered; then, as he got the coat free of his shoulder, she saw that his shirt-sleeve was stained with blood.

She gave a cry, but Asher said quietly:

"It's nothing serious. If you will get some warm water and a clean piece of rag, we can soon repair the damage." He smiled into her pallid face. "I assure you it's nothing, Miss Weir. If you will kindly do as I ask you——"

"But you ought to have a doctor."

He frowned impatiently.

"Don't be absurd; there is no doctor for miles, and, anyway, how do you imagine you could find your way to him on such a night? Besides"—a gleam of mischief flashed into his sombre eyes—"think what a scandal there would be if he found us here together, and I told him you had shot me."

They looked at one another for a moment in silence, then Barbara turned and walked out of the room.

Mechanically she got hot water, and tore some of her handkerchiefs into rags for bandages.

Supposing she had killed him! Her face was colourless as she went back to the sitting-room and found him standing by the fire.

He had torn the shirt from his shoulder, and left bare a long, zigzag, torn wound with ugly, sagging edges.

"You see—it's nothing very much," he said, as he saw her horrified eyes. "Fortunately, the bullet only grazed my shoulder. Now, do you think you can bathe it, and bandage me up, or will you faint at the sight of blood?"

"I am not the fainting sort," she protested.

He laughed.

"No? I think you were very near it this evening."

The hot blood swept her face.

"I know you don't believe me—but there *was* a man! and he *did* try and break into the house," she said, tremulously.

"I know." For a moment she felt his hand on hers. "I saw him, but he cleared off before I could do anything." Unwilling emotion filled his eyes. "If anything had happened to you"—he broke off and stopped—"I should have caught that fellow and broken his neck for him, if you had not tried to kill me," he added, in his usual voice. "I think you will get at me better if I sit down."

Barbara knelt beside him, and washed and bandaged his wound. As he had said, it was not much

more than a bad graze, but it had bled a good deal, and, being in the hollow of his shoulder, was difficult to bandage.

Suddenly she broke out tremulously:

"I might have killed you."

He looked down at her careful handiwork.

"Yes, if it had been an inch nearer my throat there would have been a different tale to tell," he agreed, coolly.

She sat back on her heels, and looked at him.

"What should I have done and what would have been done to me?"

He laughed at the tragedy of her words.

"They would not have done much to you."

"What do you mean?" she asked, not understanding.

"I mean that if a man deliberately kidnaps a woman, and shuts her up in a place like this, he deserves all he gets, or, at least, that is what the law would say; they would consider that you had a perfect right to kill me."

She rose to her feet; she felt that he was laughing at her.

"I think you are the strangest man I have ever met," she said in a resentful voice.

"A man without a heart—eh?" Asher submitted,

dryly. "No, please leave those things alone for to-night"—as she made a movement to take up the supper tray. "Please go to bed—you look like a ghost; and remember that there is no need to be frightened any more. No harm will come to you while I am here."

She stood hesitating.

"And your arm?" she asked.

"That's nothing. I am quite all right. I would not have troubled you only I was unable to dress it myself, and if any dirt had got in you might have had me as a patient for some time. Good night, Miss Weir."

Barbara went upstairs without answering.

Her head ached violently, and her throbbing nerves felt as if they would never be still again, but one thought shone steadfastly in her mind, that after the events of to-day she would stand no more, and that, come what might, to-morrow should see the end of her imprisonment.

Chapter VI

THERE was a strange silence throughout the little cottage when very early the following morning Barbara crept down the stairs, her shoes in her hand, and paused nervously at the foot of the staircase.

It was barely light; a weird greyness seemed to envelop everything, and outside in the wood she could hear the faint awakening chirp, chirp of sleepy birds.

A board creaked beneath her foot, and she caught her breath in panic. Supposing Asher heard her, and at the last moment prevented her from escaping.

She looked back behind her up the narrow staircase, but there was not a sign or sound, and she crept on again, her heartbeats almost choking her.

The terror of yesterday had departed, and she could mock at herself for her fear. Why had she been afraid of Asher's threats? Edmund Hyde was quite capable of looking after himself; her one object was to get to him, and to warn him.

If Rufus was indeed mad, they would know how to deal with him; if, as sometimes it seemed, he was merely a brute and a bully, well—— She stopped, her hand on the latch of the door, as from the sitting-room she heard the sound of a voice speaking aloud.

There was some one with Asher.

She held her breath, listening with strained attention. A queer, confused jumble of words it sounded, and against her will she found herself creeping closer to the door, which stood a little ajar.

Some one was with him—some one——

Instinct it was that compelled her to push that closed door wider, but for a moment she could distinguish nothing in the gloom; then her vision cleared, and she saw the dead ashes of last night's fire in the grate, the stiff legs of the trestle table with the remains of last night's supper still upon it, and there, in the chair, she at last distinguished Asher's lumbering figure.

He looked all huddled up and shapeless, as if he had fallen uncomfortably asleep, or as if he were ill.

Barbara forgot everything but this last possi-

bility; she dropped her shoes with a little thud to the floor, and took a step forward.

"Mr. Asher."

Then, as he made no answer, she went hurriedly to the window and drew back the casement curtains, admitting what pale light there was to be had, before she turned sharply round.

Asher had risen to his feet, and stood with a hand on the back of the arm-chair, swaying unsteadily.

His face was flushed and his eyes feverish, and Barbara had the queer feeling that although he was looking directly at her he could not see her; then he gave a stupid sort of laugh.

"I am sorry. I'm afraid I've got a bad chill. This rotten climate—I was soaked to the skin last night getting back. Don't look so scared—it's nothing. I've got a touch of my old friend ague, too. I——"

He put his hand to his head with a little gesture of giddiness.

Barbara took a step towards him.

"Who were you talking to in here just now?" she asked.

He shook his head vaguely.

"Nobody—nobody's been here. I——" his voice trailed away, and he sank back heavily into the chair again, his head falling forward on to his breast.

Barbara stood for one irresolute moment, then she made up her mind.

She could not leave him in this condition; badly as he had treated her, she could not retaliate so brutally.

She put on her shoes, took off her hat and coat, and proceeded to light the fire; then she fetched some hot milk and made him drink it.

He made a little grimace, and smiled, but he had soon lost himself again in the vague, incoherent mutterings which had at first attracted her attention. He was shivering from head to foot, although his head and hands were burning hot; his shoulder where she had shot him the night before was hurting badly, too, she could see, for he winced when she touched it. She fetched rugs and blankets and piled them around him, and presently he dozed off into a fitful sleep, only to waken again to resume the same wandering speech.

Barbara stood looking at him with softened eyes.

He was no longer a man whom she could find it in her heart to hate; he looked strangely helpless

and youthful as he sat there with his hair all tousled and the fever flush in his face. Not a man of whom to be afraid! Perhaps a man to pity, or even love! She turned abruptly away at that last thought; how absurd! when he had brutally ill-treated her and made her suffer.

She went about the work of the little house as usual, all her plans for flight were forgotten; and from time to time she went back into the sitting-room to pile more wood on the fire, and to watch Asher in his restless sleep.

Now and then she could distinguish words in his mutterings—often he spoke of his sister and once she caught her own name; but chiefly it was of strange things and places that he spoke in a fierce, wild sort of way; and Barbara found herself listening in fascination to this peep of the man as she had never known him.

And once he laughed, a spontaneous, boyish laugh that brought an involuntary smile to her lips; then suddenly she was aware that the light of consciousness was in his eyes once more, and that he was looking at her in his old sardonic way.

She spoke to him gently.

"I hope you are better. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Do for me?" he repeated her words vaguely, his feverish eyes still upon her, then suddenly he held out his hand.

"Come here, Barbara."

She caught her breath at the unwonted gentleness of his voice, and the hot colour rose in her cheeks.

"What do you want?" she asked, tremulously, but already he had forgotten his request and had closed his eyes again.

She watched him all day, anxious and worried, not knowing what to do for the best, and too ignorant of sickness to realize that warmth and rest were all that were necessary to cure him.

She sat up with him all night, dozing fitfully now and then, and waking with a start of terror to the remembrance of where she was and what had happened.

In the morning she could see that he was not any better, and a morbid terror seized her that he might die.

What would she do then? What would become of her? She sat down by the fire and hid her face in her hands. The events of the past days had shaken her to the depths of her foundations; her

nerves felt in rags; she would never have believed it possible that she could suffer so.

She had always considered herself so self-possessed.

And men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives.

The tuneful doggerel lines haunted her, irretrievably mixed up with the warm night scent of Linda's garden, and the smell of the tobacco in Rufus Asher's pipe.

She had been wonderfully drawn to him that night, she had liked sitting beside him, listening to his queer theories of life, and his philosophy, and he had nearly loved her.

She thought of the resolve she had made the first night at the cottage, that she would punish him by making herself everything to him, and she had failed.

He cared no more for her now than he had done the day he brought her here.

A log of wood fell smouldering to the hearth, and she looked up to find Asher watching her.

She rose guiltily to her feet.

"Is there anything you want? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you."

She stooped to replace one of the rugs that had slipped from about him.

"Do you feel any better?"

He answered her question by asking another.

"Why didn't you clear off and leave me?"

Tears swam into her eyes.

"How could I? I thought you were ill."

His face took on again its old grim lines.

"In fact, you heap coals of fire on my head. Is that it?"

"No, but I happen to be human."

"And I do not, you mean?"

"I did not say so."

She took a glass of warm milk from the grate.

"If you drink this you may sleep again."

"I don't want to sleep again. I am much better." He looked better, though his voice was still weak. She saw with thankfulness that the look of glassy feverishness had vanished from his eyes, and his skin felt cooler.

"Are you often ill like this?" she asked.

"I had one attack just before I knew you. It's nothing to anyone who understands, but this time

getting wet made things worse, and my shoulder helped, I suppose."

She flushed.

"Your shoulder ought to be dressed again."

"You shall do it presently." His eyes searched her face. "How long have you been sitting there, Miss Weir?"

"All night. It's half-past ten now—half-past ten in the morning."

"And you haven't slept?"

"I think I dozed sometimes."

"You heap coals of fire on my head," he said again, sullenly.

Barbara did not answer; she felt dead tired, but she would not admit it.

"You have lost an excellent opportunity to run away from me," he said, after a moment.

Defiance crept into her eyes.

"The opportunity will come again."

"Perhaps. When I am strong enough to run after you and bring you back."

She took away the empty glass and left him; when later she came back he was sleeping quietly, and breathing more easily.

So he was not going to die. She drew a breath of relief.

It was getting dusk when Asher awoke; he gave a terrific yawn, stretching his arms and letting the rugs fall around him as he sat up and blinked across the firelit space at Barbara.

"How long have I been asleep?" he demanded, brusquely.

"All day."

He sat for a moment looking at her; then he rose to his feet, moving his injured arm gingerly.

Barbara saw the stiff movement and said at once:

"I will bathe your shoulder again and put fresh bandages on if you will let me."

She fetched water and strips of linen, and he sat passively while she carried out her task.

Then she rose to her feet with a breathless sigh.

"There, I think it's better. Does it hurt very much?"

"Not at all, except when I move my arm."

She made a movement to turn away, but he caught her hand.

"How badly do you hate me, Miss Weir?"

She shook her head.

"I don't hate you. I think I'm just—sorry."

"For me?"

"Yes."

He released her.

"I won't have you sorry for me. You can be sorry for yourself instead." She looked at him with steady eyes.

"You've no need to be sorry for me," he said again, in his old harsh way. "Anything I do, or have done, has been deliberate. I am prepared to abide by the consequences."

She gave a wavering smile.

"I would not like to have it on my conscience that I had ruined a fellow creature's life," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if it ever gets known—as it will do, that I spent all this time here alone with you, the scandal of it will follow me all my life. Not that I care," she added, scornfully.

He sat staring before him with fierce eyes, then he said, with a sneer:

"Are you suggesting that I make honourable reparation by asking you to marry me? Is that why you have stayed so willingly?"

Barbara turned white.

"I suppose you are deliberately trying to insult me," she said. "But some day perhaps it will lie in my power to pay you back."

He laughed.

"You need not ride the high horse with me, Miss Weir, and nothing I have ever said to you can be more insulting than things you have allowed to be said by my estimable brother-in-law. As I believe I once before reminded you, I at least am unmarried."

Barbara swung round; for a moment she was mad with rage, mad with the insults which he had heaped upon her.

"You brute! Oh, you brute!" she sobbed, and beside herself with rage she lifted her hand and struck him across the face.

That brought her to her senses; she fell back, white and shaken, trembling from head to foot, staring at him with horrified eyes, and in the following silence there came a sharp tap-tapping at the outer door.

Asher rose to his feet and stood uncertainly clinging to the arms of his chair; then with a great effort he mastered his weakness and made a quick gesture, motioning Barbara aside when she would have moved forward.

"Stay there. I'll go."

He went out into the little passage, and Barbara heard him fumbling with the bolts and fastenings of the outer door as she crept after him.

The heavy door creaked open.

There was a silence; then Barbara heard a stifled imprecation, and a man's amazed voice:

"Rufus! Good Lord, man, then you are here?"

It was Edmund Hyde.

Chapter VII

AT the sound of Hyde's voice, Barbara gave a cry and half moved forward; then, with an effort, she controlled herself and stood where she was in the doorway, her hands pressed tightly over her lips, her eyes straining towards the two men.

She could not see Asher's face, but Edmund's she saw plainly, with its frankly-amazed look and wavering smile. Then the hand which he had extended fell to his side, and he frowned.

"Good heavens, man! What on earth's the matter?" he broke out, irritably. "Aren't you going to ask me in, and what in the world are you doing in this benighted spot? Is it a game? Are you a second Robinson Crusoe or Swiss Family Robinson, or something? And——" He broke off roughly as, for the first time, he saw Barbara standing in the doorway behind Asher. The hot colour rushed in an agitated wave to his good-natured face, and for a moment he could not speak; then he stammered out:

"Barbara! Barbara! Good heavens, what is the meaning of it?"

Barbara spoke; her words were punctuated with a little high, hysterical laugh.

"It's not in the least what it looks like, Edmund! It isn't a bit of a romance, or——" She gave a stifled cry. "Oh, don't let him shut the door—don't let him shut the door!" For Asher had made a swift movement as if he would have closed it in Edmund's face.

There was a momentary struggle, half-hearted on Asher's part, for he was still weak. Then Edmund forced his way into the narrow hall, where he stood flushed and rather breathless.

"Now, if you'll have the goodness to explain what the devil this means I shall be much obliged," he broke out angrily. "Hullo, old chap, are you ill?" For Asher had swayed unsteadily.

"Leave me alone." He steadied himself by the door-frame, his face was hard and ugly, with new anger and bitterness. "Who sent you here?" he demanded. "How did you find your way here, and what the devil do you mean by interfering with me?"

His voice had risen threateningly, his face had

flushed an ugly red, and yet he looked much more a sick man than a savage one, and Barbara took an involuntary step towards him.

Edmund looked from one to the other with growing doubt and suspicion, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"If I am unwelcome, as it seems, I have no wish to stay. We have had no word from you since you left the house a fortnight ago, and we were naturally anxious. There were letters waiting, and at last I opened one—it was from Australia, and made a reference to this place. Heaven knows what made me think you might be here, but it did occur to me, and so I came along to investigate——"

"You are mighty anxious for my welfare all at once," Asher sneered.

Edmund flushed and paled, as if with some sudden emotion.

"I naturally thought you were the proper one to turn to—in the circumstances," he said, awkwardly. "Linda——"

Asher took a step forward.

"We will leave my sister's name out of this conversation, if you please," he began, stiffly; but

Barbara interrupted, stepping hurriedly between the two men. "Edmund! Linda—what has happened?" she asked, breathlessly.

Edmund tried to answer, his face worked convulsively, then suddenly he hid his face in his hands.

"She's gone," he said, hoarsely.

"Gone!" Asher swayed forward and gripped his shoulder with merciless fingers. "You hound! What have you done to her! If anything has happened, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life! I——"

"Rufus! Rufus!" Barbara caught his arm with both hands, dragging him away. "Oh, for heaven's sake—you'll hurt him—oh, Edmund, don't—for my sake, don't!" For Edmund had made a furious rush at his brother-in-law. She stood between them, a frail barrier dividing their rage and passion; then, as Edmund's hand fell to his side, she said quietly:

"He doesn't understand. Mr. Asher doesn't understand. We shall have to tell him, at last."

And there followed a tragic silence, during which the rage and passion died from Edmund's white face, and when he spoke it was very quietly, al-

most without expression, as if he had run through all his emotions and found himself bankrupt of more.

"Linda went away two days ago with Hugh Langely. She left a note for you—I have it here. There was nothing for me."

"Linda went away with Hugh Langely," Rufus Asher repeated the words vaguely. "Why—well, where has she gone? Why with him? Why—I don't understand." He put his hand to his forehead dizzily. "Why with Langely?" he asked again.

Nobody answered; Barbara was watching him with pitiful eyes, and suddenly a glimmer of what they were trying to tell him seemed to force its way into his brain.

His face flushed from chin to brow, his eyes narrowed; then he broke out, almost shouting:

"You infernal scoundrel! You're trying to blacken my sister's name to shield your own damnable conduct; you're trying to make me believe—— I'll make you pay for this!"

But as he lunged forward, blinded with the strength of his own passion, he seemed to crumple and collapse, and but for Edmund's supporting arms he would have fallen.

Between them they got him back into the sitting-room, and put him into the big chair.

"What's the matter with him?" Edmund asked, impatiently. "I feel as if I'm in some horrible nightmare!"

Barbara smiled.

"These last days have been worse than a nightmare to me," she said, faintly. "Look, he's coming round."

Edmund walked over to the window, and stood with his back turned, staring into the wood, and presently he heard Asher say:

"Miss Weir, will you please leave us for a moment?"

Barbara expostulated.

"Why need I? You can have nothing to say that I do not know already. Please let me stay. I——"

Asher interrupted ruthlessly.

"Will you please go?"

And she walked out of the room without another word, closing the door behind her.

Edmund turned round from the window.

"Well?" he submitted, curtly.

His brother-in-law was still sitting in the big

chair, but he rose, keeping one hand on the chair-back, as he began to speak:

"I should like to have my say first, if you have no objection, and then I will listen to any—lies you choose to tell me." The insult was deliberate, but Edmund took no notice, and the elder man went on. "The last night I was in your house I unwittingly overheard a conversation on the veranda between you and—and Miss Weir. I had already discovered that my sister was unhappy in her marriage, and what I heard confirmed my suspicions that you were not playing the game. I saw Miss Weir in your arms—I heard the plans you made with her to meet in London the following day, and I made up my mind that these things should not happen." He stopped for a moment, and drew a deep breath, and now his hand was clenched as it rested on the chair-back; then he went on more quietly. "I managed to travel to London with Miss Weir, and to send a couple of wires before we left your house, with the result that I was met in London by a motorcar, in which I kidnapped her—yes, I admit it!" he said, defiantly, as Hyde made an inarticulate sound. "I brought her down here, and have kept her here ever since,

away from you, and where she could do no harm to my sister. I don't know what cock-and-bull story you have brought here with you, or how you managed to find us, but——"

"I have told you. I opened a letter from Australia which was marked 'Urgent. Please forward immediately if left,' and in it was an allusion to this cottage. As I said just now, I don't know what made me think you would be here, but something urged me to come."

Asher interrupted sneeringly.

"And now you can go, as soon as you like, and you will not take Miss Weir with you, if, as I suppose, that is the reason you have come."

Edmund's face hardened.

"I hardly imagine, from what I can see, that Miss Weir would wish to leave you," he sneered. "But if you have any doubts, I can set your mind at rest. I am not here for Miss Weir's sake at all, but for your sister's." He waited, but Asher did not speak, and the younger man said again, with a pathetic weariness: "Linda left my house two days ago with Langely. I have done all I can to find her, and have failed. My God, man!" he broke out in sudden agony, "why weren't you there? Why have you stayed away like this?

You might have saved her—you might have saved her!" Asher tried to speak, but no words would come, and Edmund went on: "I'd had my doubts for some time, but I wasn't sure! And I was afraid to speak for fear of precipitating matters, though Barbie urged me to. She knew! She was right all along!" He struck his hands together in pain. "Why didn't I listen to her! Why didn't I?" He paced away, and came back agitatedly. "As for what you saw on the veranda"—he made a contemptuous gesture, as if he were dismissing a thought unworthy of consideration in the face of the overwhelming tragedy that had come into his life—"you were either dreaming or you've exaggerated the whole thing. I'm not in love with Barbara Weir, or she with me. The thing's absurd! We're good friends, and I'm fond of her; she's been a brick to me—she's done her best with Linda. If I'd listened to her, none of this would have happened; if only I'd listened!"

Asher stood like a man turned to stone. There was something terrible in the expression of his eyes; he looked like a child who has been frightened by the story of a bogey and who begs for contradiction. After a moment he broke out hoarsely:

"But I heard you, man, I heard you. With my own ears I heard you make the arrangement to meet her in London. I heard you say that you were glad it was all at an end at last. I heard you say——"

"You heard neither of us say anything we should have been ashamed of your hearing. And as for her being in my arms—pshaw! you make me tired. What the devil's the matter with you? Have you gone mad?"

There was a long silence. Asher stood staring before him as if he had forgotten where he was, as if he had forgotten everything. Then he said slowly, as if he were talking to himself:

"And I brought her here, I treated her like a dog! My God, will she ever forgive me?"

Edmund moved uneasily; he had not realized the enormity of what Rufus had done; he could think only of his wife and his own tragedy. And he said again in blind rage:

"If you'd been there, Linda would not have gone. She loved you! She would have listened to you. I've done my best, heaven knows, but I suppose I failed! But to leave me for that cur! If ever I find him——" He began to pace the room like a madman.

Rufus seemed to have forgotten him; presently he turned slowly and walked to the door; he opened it, and stood for a moment staring into the narrow hall, which was growing dark with shadows.

Barbara was there, sitting on the bottom stair, her eyes wide with fear and apprehension, her face white.

For a moment they looked at one another silently, then Asher said in a difficult voice:

"Why didn't you tell me, Barbara? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you? What was there to tell?"

"What a fool I was—what an unpardonable fool!"

The faintest smile flickered through her eyes.

"Would you have believed me?" she asked.

They both knew he would not; they both knew that no matter how hard she had tried to make him understand, her words would have fallen on deaf ears.

It seemed a long time before either of them spoke again. Then Barbara said, with a cynical note in her voice:

"I suppose this means that my imprisonment is at an end, and that I am free to go?"

He seemed not to hear; presently he broke out:

"You will never forgive me! You will never forgive me, or believe how humiliated, how—indescribably—grieved——"

The words were halting, inadequate, and yet they came from his heart.

Barbara smiled.

"If my forgiveness is worth anything to you, you may have it," she said. "But no sorrow of yours will wipe out this past fortnight. When people know that I was here with you my life will be ruined, and nothing you can say or do will alter that."

There was a burning flush in her face, she felt as if her heart had grown numbed to her position, and that to-day it had awakened again, and was scorching her.

She did not raise her eyes as she walked ino the room where Edmund Hyde waited.

She went up to him, and her whole body was shaken with sobbing, and the tears rained from her eyes as she clutched his arm.

"Take me away from here—take me away!" she said.

Chapter VIII

BARBARA left the two men downstairs while she went to her room, and with trembling hands began hurriedly repacking the few things she had taken from her luggage.

Now her captivity was at an end, and there was nothing to prevent her from walking out of the house, she felt a strange reluctance to go.

The little room in which she had passed so many sleepless hours suddenly assumed friendly proportions; the sunlight filtering through the latticed window fell warmly on her face as she moved to and fro, folding garments and stuffing them into her open boxes.

She had no idea where she was going, she had made no plans for the future, but she kept wondering what Asher would do, and how long he would stay alone in the little house.

She remembered with a pang of pity that he was a sick man, and she paused for a moment in her task of locking the large trunk, sitting back on her heels, and staring before her with pitying eyes.

What would he do? He was homeless and friendless as far as she knew, now there was no longer even Linda to whom he could turn.

Linda! So in spite of everything she had gone away with Hugh Langely, a man who was utterly dishonourable and unworthy of consideration. What would become of her? What would she do when he wearied of his infatuation?

Barbara thought of the beautiful home and the kind, considerate husband which her friend had left, and all for what? For a short-lived foolish passion which would burn itself out with pathetic speed.

What mad things people did for love, and how useless it seemed to be.

Edmund called to her from the foot of the stairs.

"Are you ready, Barbara?"

She rose hurriedly.

"Yes—if you could just come and fasten my luggage."

He came up the stairs two at a time.

"Let's get out of this place," he said, abruptly. "If I stay here much longer I shall do or say something I shall be sorry for."

Alarm crept into her eyes.

"Mr. Asher," she faltered.

Hyde shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't understand the fellow. How you've stayed with him so long beats me."

Barbara interrupted quickly, her cheeks flushing painfully.

"Do you imagine that I stayed from choice?"

"Of course not. I only—— Well, the whole thing beats me. Do you mean to say that he never gave you a chance to get away?"

"Yes—several times; but he threatened to find you if I did, and shoot you, and he would have kept his word." She smiled, faintly. "So, you see, I stayed."

Edmund finished strapping the boxes and rose to his feet, looking at Barbara with critical eyes.

"Is Rufus in love with you?" he demanded, after a moment.

The treacherous blood rushed headlong to Barbara's cheeks, but she managed to laugh.

"Would he have treated me like this, do you think, if he had been?" she asked.

"I don't know; there are so many ways of loving," Hyde said, with unusual insight; he turned away and stood looking out of the window with

tragic eyes. "I could have sworn once that Linda loved me," he added, brokenly.

Barbara followed him, and slipped a hand through his arm.

"Edmund, I'm so terribly sorry! More sorry than I can say."

"I know; you've been a brick." He looked at her with eyes suddenly wet. "Barbie, I wonder if things would have turned out all right if—if what Rufus thinks had been true."

She laughed nervously.

"I don't know; we've always been good friends." She drew her hand away. "I'll just put my hat on, and then we can go."

"I'll take the boxes down," Edmund said. But at the door he paused to look back at her. "Barbara, you know I ought to give Rufus a damned good hiding."

She cried out in protest.

"Oh, no, no! He thought he was doing the best thing for Linda. He loved her so much; she was everything to him; besides, he's ill, Edmund—he's very ill, I think."

Edmund gave an inaudible growl.

"Serve him right," he said.

Presently Barbara went downstairs.

Edmund was waiting for her at the front door.

"I ran the car as far as I could along the footpath," he said. "But you'll have to walk a little way. I've taken the luggage along."

She glanced apprehensively towards the sitting-room door.

"Is he—is Mr. Asher——"

"He's in there. I should keep away from him if I were you."

Barbara hesitated, but against her will she thought of the night in Linda's garden when she and Rufus Asher had sat in the darkness together, and he had talked of his life. She had been fascinated by the something different about him that set him apart from the other men she had known. She had called him a brute and a man without a heart, but always she had known that it was not true. His love for his sister had been something much above ordinary love in its strength and loyalty, and she realized how keenly he must be suffering.

Edmund had gone on to the car, and impulsively she went back to the sitting-room, where she had spent so many strange days.

Asher was standing by the fire, his arm resting on the wooden shelf above it, his back turned to

her, but he looked round when she said rather nervously: "Good-bye, Mr. Asher."

He made no answer, but there was a look of such dumb agony in his eyes that she forgot her bitterness and impulsively held out her hand.

"Oh, I am so sorry—sorry for you," she faltered. "If there is anything I can do—any way in which I can help Linda——"

He looked at the kind little hand extended to him, then he turned away, and laid his head down on his arms with tragic abandon.

"Please—go!" he said, hoarsely, and without a word Barbara obeyed.

Her eyes were blinded with tears as she went out into the sunlight, and there was a strange pain in her heart.

"He might have shaken hands," she thought. "After all, it is he who has injured me."

She met Edmund Hyde coming back to look for her.

"I thought perhaps Asher——" he began.

Barbara shook her head.

"I offered to shake hands with him, and he wouldn't," she said, painfully.

Hyde stared at her.

"You — offered ——" he repeated blankly.

"Well, the ways of you women are beyond me altogether."

They drove slowly down the narrow footpath, and out on to the main road.

"I shall never come here again," Barbara thought, and she turned her head for one last look at the tall trees and the dark wood, but the only thing she saw was Asher as she had left him with his broken look and bowed head.

"It was his own fault, he has only himself to blame," she told herself, but somehow it did not seem to help matters.

"I shall have to take you to an hotel," Hyde was saying. "I can't very well take you back home with me, or there will be more scandal."

Barbara winced, and he hastened to add:

"I'm sorry, my dear. You know I did not mean to hurt you."

"I don't think anything can hurt me again," Barbara answered. "And what will you do, Edmund, I mean about Linda?"

"What can I do? God alone knows."

"We must try and find her."

"What is the use? She will never come back to me; she loves that—that blackguard too well!" He set his teeth. "My God! And to think that

I let him come to the house, that I ever shook hands with him!"

"You didn't know, and anyway you could not have stopped it."

"I could have killed him," Edmund said, savagely.

Barbara shivered.

"It's so easy to talk of killing," she answered. "And what's the use of that either? You'd be the sufferer in the long run."

"I seem to be the sufferer now."

It was dark when they reached London; they drove to the hotel where Barbara was to have stayed a fortnight ago, and she booked a room.

"I don't like leaving you here alone," Edmund said, uncomfortably. "You know, Barbie, all this seems somehow to be my own fault. If I hadn't failed Linda——"

She answered quickly.

"You mustn't blame yourself. I always think that things like this are meant to be, and cannot be avoided."

He took her hand, and held it hard.

"You're a good pal, Barbara."

"Am I? That's the first nice thing that has been said to me for ages," she told him. "Mr.

Asher——" She broke off; it hurt intolerably to remember the bitter, sneering things he had said to her.

"Oh, Asher! He's a madman!" Edmund said.

She shook her head.

"I thought so once, but I don't now. It's only just that he's different from us, Edmund—more honest; I think that's it, really, only we call it primitive! I am sure that he really thought he was justified in—in what he did to me. I'm sorry for him." She flushed beneath his quizzical eyes. "I mean it," she said, bravely. "I am sorry for him. I think in his own way he is suffering far more than any of us."

And she was right. Rufus Asher lived through the most terrible moments of his life as he stood in the silent room of the little cottage listening to the sound of Barbara's departing footsteps.

It seemed that with one cruel blow he had lost everything he had held dear, and he himself was responsible.

He thought of Barbara as she had been when he first met her, of her strange attraction for him, her simplicity and sweet friendliness.

God! what a villain he had been; nothing could

ever wipe away the memory; and yet at the last she had offered him her hand and her pity!

He stood for a long time where she had left him, and a great, unbreakable silence seemed to have fallen on the world.

The bitter, angry words of his brother-in-law swept through his mind:

"How are you going to explain things to people? Every one knows that something strange has happened to Barbara. Damn it all, man, you'll have to marry her, and that's all there is to it."

Marry her! Was it likely that she would even listen to such a proposal? And yet—and in this lay the very core of his suffering—he knew that in spite of the way he had tried to force himself to hate and despise her, he had only succeeded in loving her with every beat of his heart.

And for his punishment he knew, too, that she cared so little for him that she could even find it in her heart to pity him for the fool he had been, the unconscionable brute.

His life was devastated; the sister he had adored and trusted had betrayed his trust, and the woman who might have grown to love him had fled from him with thankfulness.

That last night at his sister's, when he had come

out of his room and found Linda on the stairs, he knew whom he had expected to find! In his heart he had suspected Barbara of every vile deception to which a woman could stoop, and she had been innocent.

Would she forgive him? He dared not hope that she would.

He had been mad to come home; he might have known that he was out of the picture for ever; far better to have stayed amongst the people who understood him, and who were rough and primitive like himself.

A smouldering log falling with a clatter to the hearth roused him at last, and he looked up to find the sunshine gone, and the room grey and shadowy.

He moved, and going out into the narrow passage shut and locked the front door.

For to-night he must stay here at all events; to-morrow—what to-morrow was there?

He found the lamp and lit it, and pulled the curtains over the windows, shutting out the wood and the tall trees.

As he turned back to the fire his foot touched some little object lying on the floor—a glove—Barbara's glove.

He stooped and picked it up; it felt warm, almost human to his cold hand, as he stood looking down at it.

She had gone out of his life; he had only ever held her by brutal chains which had hurt her, and now she was free.

The room seemed filled with her. He saw her with fear in her eyes as on that first night; he saw her smiling bravely, making her poor little overtures of friendship; he saw her white and unconscious as she had been when she fell at his feet.

And men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows'
wives——

The doggerel lines came back to torture him, and then for the first time a new doubt swept into his aching, jealous mind.

Supposing all that Edmund had told him was a lie? Had he allowed himself to be too easily convinced? Supposing it was all a trumped-up story in order to take Barbara away with him?

His face flushed and the big veins stood out on his forehead.

They had made a fool of him, Edmund and Bar-

bara. He could see it all now! They had told him their plausible story, and he, like the fool he was, had believed it.

God! What a fool!

In his weak, shaken state it was easy to convince himself afresh; every memory of them seemed proof of this new thought.

And he had let them go—and together! Perhaps even now they were laughing at his credulity; perhaps even now she was in Edmund's arms as he had imagined she had been that night at Linda's.

For a moment he went mad; pain and his own desire rose in his heart and fought down common sense and sanity.

To find them, that was all he wanted, the only desire left to him.

They had got two hours' start of him—two hours in a fast car! But time and distance were nothing to his bitter jealousy; and presently he was out in the darkening wood, striding down the narrow pathway where the marks of Edmund Hyde's car-wheels still showed in the soft ground, and the little cottage was left alone.

Chapter IX

IN spite of Barbara's objection, Edmund had insisted on paying for her rooms at the London hotel.

"You've suffered disgracefully at the hands of my precious brother-in-law," he said, obstinately. "And at least you must let me do this to try and make up to you in some small way. After all," and he smiled, "we are good friends, Barbie."

"Yes, I know, but—— Oh, very well!" She was too tired to argue. She gave in resignedly and stood by, while he engaged a bedroom and sitting-room for her.

"I shan't be here long," she told him, as they turned away from the bureau together. "I must get something to do. I've come to the conclusion that laziness doesn't suit me. Besides, I haven't enough money."

Hyde flushed.

"I wish you'd let me help you."

Barbara laughed and shook her head.

"Thank you, but I like my independence."

She held out her hand remorsefully, struck by the mortification in his face. "Don't look like that; you've been very kind to me. I only wish I could help you, Edmund. What are you going to do about Linda?"

"What can I do? She hates me. She won't live with me again, I know that." He made a hopeless gesture. "Every one says I ought to divorce her, and I would if I thought there was a certainty of that cur marrying her."

"If Mr. Asher——" Barbara began, and stopped.

Hyde laughed.

"If Asher gets on Langely's track," he said, "it will mean a broken neck."

"And when shall I see you again?" Barbara asked, as they said good-bye. She dreaded being left.

"I'll come to-morrow. I'll come early," he promised. He lifted her hand to his lips. "Good-bye, Barbie, and God bless you."

Barbara made no answer, but there were smarting tears in her eyes as she went upstairs.

The strain of the last weeks had told upon her more severely than she had guessed. She felt as if she was on the verge of a bad breakdown as she

shut the door and walked over to the fire in the little sitting-room. She clenched her hands and bit her lip to keep back the tears of sheer weakness that would rise.

"I won't cry—I won't," she told herself, fiercely. "There's nothing for me to cry about. I'm safe, and I'm free."

She took off her hat and coat and bathed her face in cold water.

She felt better, and began to unpack her boxes, shaking out the crumpled frocks.

One, the frock she had worn that last night at Linda's, she held for some time, looking at it with a queer expression in her eyes.

It seemed to bring back the warm silence of the garden, and the deep, attractive voice of Rufus Asher as he sat beside her under the big tree and told her about the life from which he had come.

She had thought a great deal about Asher after they parted; she had lain awake for a long time with the rumble of that haunting fox-trot tune in her head, thinking of his cynical words and the contrasting gentleness of his smile.

And men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives.

Well, it was true. There were so many cases of which she herself knew where the modern love of gaiety and amusement had sown the first seed of dissension between husband and wife, and finally ended in disaster.

Barbara loved fun and dancing as much as any other girl, but there had been times when she had longed for something better, to which she could not put a name.

"This man is different, quite different," had been her first thought after her talk in the garden with Rufus Asher. "This man is some one worth while."

He had soon shown her her mistake, for he had accused her, without giving her a chance to deny or defend herself, of an unspeakable thing, and he had treated her with the utmost contempt and disrespect.

"I ought to hate him," she thought, in wonder and helplessness. "And yet I don't! I'm only sorry for him."

And she wondered what he was doing, and who would dress his wounded shoulder for him.

Nevertheless she slept well and dreamlessly that night, and woke late into the morning to find sun-

light in her room and to see by her watch that it was past ten.

She rang for her breakfast and began to dress.

There was nothing to hurry for, no fires to light this morning, or breakfast to lay for a surly giant, but she thought of the little living-room at the cottage with strange wistfulness.

Was Asher still there? What was he doing?

Poor man! After all, he had suffered much, must still be suffering.

His love for his sister was the best thing in his life and it had been betrayed.

As Barbara was brushing her hair the telephone bell whirred.

"That you, Barbie?"

"Yes—oh, yes, Edmund."

"I'm sorry. I can't get round till after lunch. I hope you'll be all right."

She laughed, trying to hide her disappointment.

"Quite all right. What time will you come?"

"As soon as I can, about three, I hope. Will you be in?"

"I will wait for you. And, Edmund, is there any news of Linda?"

She heard his short, unhappy laugh.

"Yes. You'll know soon. Good-bye."

She rang off and went back to the dressing-table. She had counted on seeing Edmund that morning.

She laid down the brush, and poured out a fresh cup of tea.

No need to hurry after all; she had all the morning to get through.

The fire had been lit in the little sitting-room, which led from her bedroom, and she took the tea in there and sat down in a big chair, resting her feet on the fender.

It was strange how her thoughts turned again and again to Asher.

What was he doing? Who had got his breakfast for him?

"I don't know why I bother about him," she thought. "He was a brute to me. I don't know why I give him a thought."

There was a knock at the door, and she turned.

"Come in."

There was the barest hesitation, and then Rufus Asher walked into the room.

Barbara sat like a figure of stone, her lips parted, her eyes wide, staring blankly at him; then she rose stiffly to her feet.

"Mr. Asher——" Her voice was only a whis-

per, and her heart beat so fast that it seemed to be choking her.

Asher shut the door and came forward.

"Yes—I suppose you were hardly expecting me?"

Barbara put her cup down on the table; she was trembling violently, and she raised one shaking hand to push back the loose waves of hair which fell about her face and shoulders.

"Why are you here? Who allowed you to come up? Is Edmund—is he——"

Asher laughed roughly.

"Edmund! I knew that was it." He stood still for a moment, breathing fast, staring at her with a strange expression in his eyes; then he strode forward and caught her wrist in fingers of steel.

"A pretty fool you've made of me, you and he," he said, thickly.

In spite of his roughness, the touch of his fingers upon her wrist seemed to steady her, and her voice was almost controlled as she answered him.

"I don't know what you mean. What is the matter? If you are ill——"

He seemed not to hear.

"I was a fool to believe you. I ought to have

seen through the game. How did you let him know where you were? How did he find you? Tell me —tell me."

He shook her as if she had been a child, and Barbara caught her breath.

"Mr. Asher, if you are a gentleman——"

"I'm not. I don't pretend to be, but I'm honest. You got word somehow to Edmund Hyde, to your—lover! And he came—he came with that precious cock-and-bull story about Linda —about my sister—and I was fool enough to believe you both. It was only afterwards, when you had gone, that I realized how easily I'd been fooled! Fooled!"

He was mad, she told herself, and yet there was no terror of him in her heart, and her voice was gentle when she spoke.

"You are wrong, quite wrong in what you think. Mr. Hyde is not here, and he has never been anything to me, anything but a friend! He loves his wife, your sister. Oh, Mr. Asher, please believe me. Some day you'll be sorry——"

He broke in with a harsh laugh.

"Sorry! I'm sorry now! Sorry that when I had you all to myself I didn't make you mine. I

was a fool! Why need I have hung back for a scruple when he—that blackguard——"

With a sudden, fierce movement he caught her in his arms.

"I want you. I've always wanted you. Before I knew anything of this I wanted you. It was love then. I could have worshipped you as no woman has ever been worshipped, if you'd been what I thought you to be. But what does it matter?" He bent his head over her. "Kiss me, Barbara. I don't care what you are—what you've been——"

She fought him with all her strength.

"Oh, you are cruel, cruel! Let me go—let me go! For God's sake, I beg of you think what you are doing."

He only laughed.

"I love you. Turn your face to me; let me kiss you."

"I beg of you—I beg of you——"

"It's too late. I don't care any more for scruples and fine conventions. I'll take you back to the cottage or abroad, anywhere you like." He caught her hand and lifted it to his lips. "I can love you as well as Edmund or any other

man——" He broke off as he felt her relax in his arms.

She had not fainted, but for a moment she leaned helplessly against him, her face as white as death, and the tears tumbling sorrowfully down her cheeks.

"Ruffo!" It was the first time she had ever called him by his Christian name, and the sound of it spoken in her voice was like a gentle hand laid on the heat of his passion.

For a moment he hesitated, and in that moment she seized her chance.

"Let me tell you something before—before you make me hate you for ever. I suppose anything I can say will be useless—quite useless; but if you will listen to me for a moment. Rufus, I could have loved you if you had let me. That night—at Linda's—I thought of you so much after we said good night. I thought how much more worth while you were than any other man I knew."

He took his arms from about her and stood back a step, staring at her, and she went on again, all the time feeling her own helplessness.

"I would have married you then if you had asked me. I hated leaving your sister's house, because

—it meant leaving you! That is the truth, that is the truth," she said, faintly.

There was a great silence; then Asher laughed, a brutal laugh of sheer disbelief.

"And you expect me to believe you?" he scoffed. "You're clever, you're more clever than I thought. But I'm wise to you now! You're mine, and I'm not going to leave you again. They let me come up to your room because I told them you were my wife—I——"

Barbara gave a choking cry.

"Oh, you brute! You brute!"

"Brute! Am I any more of a brute than the cur who brought you here—who got you away from me by a trick? There is nothing to choose between us."

She made a last desperate effort.

"Mr. Hyde left me last night. I have not seen him since. Ask the hotel people——"

He cut in savagely.

"Ask them! There is no need to ask them. I have seen the register, and seen these rooms taken in Hyde's name. I have seen——"

"That is a lie!"

He took a step towards her.

"Lie or not, what do I care? I saw it for myself—but it's nothing!"

"Rufus!"

She fought feebly against the strength of his arms, and in spite of her fear and despair there was yet a tinge of something which was strangely like happiness in her heart.

What was the matter with her? Was she as mad as he, that she did not hate him?

She felt his lips on hers, strangely gentle, and she closed her eyes as there came a soft rapping at the door.

Asher heard it too, and, involuntarily his arms relaxed. Barbara rallied with a supreme effort and tore herself free.

She stumbled across the room and dragged open the door. She forgot her dishevelled appearance; then as she saw who stood outside she fell back with a strangled cry, for it was Asher's sister!

The only sound that broke the silence was the man's heavy breathing.

He stood with his big hands clasped into fists, his eyes fierce, and ugly patches of red streaking his face. He looked like a man who has suddenly been roused from sleep, or who has struggled out

of delirium, as he stared at his sister with dazed eyes, swaying on his feet. Linda spoke first.

"I suppose I may come in?"

There was defiance in her pretty voice, and when neither her brother nor Barbara answered, she shrugged her shoulders with a reckless movement as she came forward, shutting the door quietly behind her.

"I've been to see Edmund, and he threw me out and shut the door in my face."

Nobody answered, but a little inarticulate sound broke from Rufus, as if her careless words had mortally hurt him, but she went on: "I'm not blaming him; I deserved everything he said. I've treated him rottenly, I know, but I thought—I suppose I was a fool—but I thought he cared enough to take me back. Now I realize what a mistake I've made." Her white face quivered into a smile as she looked at her brother. "You always said it was possible to forgive anyone anything, if only you loved them enough, Ruffo. You were wrong! It isn't, or else he never really cared." She drew a deep breath, and her eyes—strangely haunted eyes they were—with deep shadows beneath them—sought Barbara's. "I don't know why I've come to you; Edmund said you hated

me, and that you would never forgive me for what has happened."

Barbara looked up. "I don't hate you," she said, painfully. "I'm only sorry—sorry——" Her voice broke on a sob.

A flicker of pain crossed Linda's face but was gone instantly.

"I'm sorry, too," she said, in a dull sort of way. "But it's no use saying that. The past is gone, and I brought it upon myself. I was mad, I suppose. I think all people are a little mad when they fall in love. But that isn't what I came to say. I came to say that I was sorry that, through me, Ruffo treated you as he has. It's my fault, all of it. He cared for me so much. I drove him to it, didn't I, Ruffo?" Asher made no answer, but a little shudder passed through his big frame, and Linda went on: "I want you to forgive him." She spoke in a bewildered sort of way. "Perhaps you have forgiven him, as he is here? I don't know. Edmund told me where you were staying, and I came because—because I know you are kind and tolerant." Her voice changed suddenly, as if the dam of her self-control had broken at last, letting loose the flood of shame and remorse which was rending her. She stumbled forward and fell

at Barbara's feet, clasping her round the knees and hiding her face. "Don't send me away as he did! Don't send me away—I've nowhere to go—nobody to turn to. I'm frightened! I'm so frightened!"

Rufus took a quick step forward, and with a hand on his sister's shoulder forced her to raise her head and look at him.

"It's true, then? You went away with Langely?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know." She closed her eyes as if she were fainting. "I don't know. He left me." The last words were only a broken whisper, and when they died away a terrible silence fell on the room.

Barbara looked at Asher, and she took a quick step between him and Linda, her hands outstretched to keep him back.

"No, no, don't hurt her!" for she saw such a look of mad rage and passion in his eyes that she was terrified. "No, no, don't hurt her, she's suffered enough," she said. Her face was beautiful in its gentleness and compassion as she stooped and lifted Linda to her feet.

"Don't be frightened. Don't be frightened.

It's all right. You can stay with me—you can stay with me, I promise."

And without another look at the man who had wronged her so terribly, she went past him with her arm still round Linda's sobbing figure and into the bedroom beyond, shutting the door.

Asher stood where they had left him. The rage and passion had died from his face, leaving him with an old and beaten look.

He had thought himself so right, so strong, and after all he had been swept away by his own arrogance and narrowness. He had heaped insults and indignities on the woman he loved, and he should have been at her feet in homage and humility.

It was the end of everything; there was no longer a place for him in this England which he had so despised and scorned.

He must go away, back to the land where hard work and privation had made him the hard, unjust judge that he was, and try and forget. That was all that was left to him.

From behind the closed door he could hear the sound of passionate sobbing, and Barbara's voice, gently soothing and comforting, and each word she spoke was like a knife turned in his heart.

She would never forgive him; he dared not ask or expect it. She would go all the days of her life hating him, shrinking from the sound of his name, and from the memory of the past weeks.

And she could have loved him! He had heard it from her own lips. Surely his punishment was more than he could bear!

Then the dividing door opened, and she stood there before him. She had twisted up her tumbled hair, the sweet, soft hair which in his madness he had kissed, and there were marks of tears on her face, but her eyes were steady and her voice unemotional when she spoke.

"I will take care of Linda; there is no need for you to wait."

They looked at one another for a long moment, and Asher knew it was good-bye. He would never see her again, and of all the passionate words that were surging in his heart he could not utter one.

When at last he found his voice it was hoarse with the depths of the emotions which were choking him.

"I can't ask you to forgive me—I can't tell you what I feel. I should like to fall at your feet—as —my sister did—and say—as she did—'Don't send me away, don't send me away. I've nowhere

to go—nobody to turn to'—but I know it would be—useless——"

There was an agonized note of questioning in the last word, but the seconds passed and Barbara made no answer, and he drew a hard breath, and turned blindly. "I've only one excuse," he said, thickly, "which will be no excuse to you, I know. I loved you."

He waited yet another moment, but Barbara did not speak, and he went out, shutting the door behind him.

Barbara went back to where Linda sat crouched by the fire. Asher had gone. She tried to feel glad, to tell herself that now all her troubles were at an end, and that she need never see him again, but Linda's first words killed the thought.

"Oh, Barbie, you did forgive him, didn't you?

"Forgive him!"

Linda rose. She looked forlorn and wretched enough; all her prettiness seemed to have been washed away in the passionate floods that had swept over her during the past weeks.

"She looks old—old!" was the thought in Barbara's heart, but she only said:

"Forgive him? Why should I forgive him? I never deserved to be treated as he treated me."

Linda crept up and diffidently touched her hand.

"Yet you can forgive me," she whispered; "and what I've done is so much—worse!"

Barbara turned away, the hot colour rushing to her face.

Yes, that was true. And she sought vainly in her mind for the explanation. It was there in her heart though she would not admit of its existence, there in her heart, waiting to be recognized and claimed. But she said:

"Don't let us talk of it; please don't let us talk of it. I want to forget—forget."

Linda laughed, a tragic little laugh.

"If only one could forget! If one could only take hold of memory and destroy it, but we can't! We can't! It's there for ever, for ever."

She began to pace the room feverishly, bright colour burning her haggard face.

"Oh, I've been a fool! A fool!" she said, striking her little useless hands together. "I thought he was so different! I thought he would love me for ever, and then——" Her voice fell to a tragic whisper. "Barbie, he never meant to marry me, he never, even in his thoughts, raised me to the dignity of his wife."

Barbara cried out at the pain in her voice.

"Oh, he is a brute! A brute! I hope there will be a special little hell for such men."

"You called Ruffo a brute," Linda said. "But he would never treat a woman as Hugh Langely has treated me. Oh, I must have been mad! I must have been mad!"

"Forget it, my dear! Try and forget it—I'll be your friend always. I'll never leave you whatever happens."

Linda fell to bitter sobbing.

"I wish I could die. I wish I could die."

Barbara stroked her hair with gentle fingers.

"You've got Rufus," she said.

It was difficult for her to speak Asher's name. "He loves you, he'll never leave you."

"Ruffo!" Linda raised her tragic eyes. "He's done with me too. I knew it as soon as I came into the room and saw him. He'll never forgive me, because of you! He'll blame me to the end of my life, and he's right, because whatever he did to you it was done for me. It was my fault! Oh, I'm not fit to live. Edmund was right, I'm not fit to live."

"Edmund is wicked to have said such a thing," Barbara cried, indignantly. "None of us are such saints that we can afford to throw stones."

Linda caught Barbara's hand and raised it to her lips.

"You're an angel. I'm not worth it. You would do far better to leave me to myself. I'm no good to any one."

Barbara soothed her as best she could.

"You're ill and tired. We'll have something to eat, and then you must rest. I'll stay with you, I promise you I will."

She made Linda take some food, and persuaded her to lie down.

"I shall not be able to sleep. I only wish I could," were Linda's last sobbing words. "I only wish I could go to sleep and never wake up any more."

But she fell into a fitful doze, and Barbara sat beside her, lost in thought, every nerve in her body aching.

"I've only one excuse—I loved you."

The words haunted her, and would not be driven from her thoughts.

What would he do? Where would he go? Not that she cared, but——

The telephone bell whirred from the next room, and she rose and went to answer it.

"Mr. Hyde to see you, madam!"

She had forgotten that Edmund was coming that afternoon. She spoke hurriedly in answer.

"Tell Mr. Hyde I cannot see him, that I am engaged—that I will write."

"Mr. Hyde is on his way up to your room, madam."

So it was too late!

She hung up the receiver, and went back to Linda, dreading to find her awake; but she was still lying with closed eyes, and breathing gently, and Barbara went back to the sitting-room, closing the door tightly.

She heard Edmund's knock almost at once, and went to admit him.

"You can't come in. I'm sorry, but——"

"Can't come in? What has happened? I want to tell you about Linda. Let me in, Barbara, I'm half off my head with worry."

Barbara hesitated, then told him the truth.

"Linda is here, now, with me."

"Here! With you?"

She saw the dull red that flooded his face, and the sudden trembling of his mouth, and she said:

"She's very unhappy, Edmund. I don't think she can bear any more. She's asleep now. Please leave her alone."

"She came to me this morning. I was a brute. I drove her away. I've been mad with remorse since. I'm afraid—oh, my God! you don't know the hell I've gone through." He raised his clenched fists. "If I find Langely—my God, I'll kill him."

"Hush, hush!" She looked back apprehensively to the closed door. "Don't wake her, Edmund—let her sleep while she can."

He caught her hand.

"You'll take care of her? You'll be kind to her? My poor little girl."

"You know I will."

"And tell her—tell her——" He broke off, his face working, and for a moment he could not continue; then he said huskily: "If there's anything I can do for her—anything! I didn't mean to be a brute."

"I know. I'll tell her."

"And you'll write to me?"

"Yes."

"God bless you!" He wrung her hand hard and went away, and Barbara tiptoed softly into the room where Linda slept; but she had not moved: she was lying with one hand beneath her cheek as a child sleeps, her lips parted and the tears wet on

her face. She looked almost like a child, she looked almost as innocent, and yet during the past few days dishonour and misery had made shipwreck of her life.

Barbara drew up a chair and sat down.

"I've only one excuse—I loved you."

How the words haunted her! She put her hands over her ears with the hope that she could shut them out, but it was impossible.

"I loved you—I loved you!"

They filled the room to the exclusion of all else beside; they were with her when at last she fell into a troubled sleep of sheer exhaustion.

It was getting dark when she woke; the fire was out and the room was cold and filled with shadows.

The yellow light from a street lamp outside shone into the room like a watchful eye, and Barbara started up, her heart beating fast, bewildered, forgetting where she was.

Then memory returned, and she crossed the room, and groped for the electric switch.

How long had she slept? And what had become of Linda?

Then she turned towards the bed, and saw that it was empty.

There was a little hollow where Linda had lain,

and the rumpled pillow—and something pinned to it.

Barbara's hands were like ice as she stumbled across the room, and snatched up the paper with its hastily scribbled message:

I can't bear it, I can't go on living. God bless you for being so good to me. I kissed you just now as you slept. Good-bye.—LINDA.

Gone! For a moment Barbara felt that the shock had turned her to stone. Gone! To what? To death? Oh, no! Not that!

Power of thought and action came back to her with the dread, and a moment later she was out in the street and breathlessly directing a taxi-driver to Edmund Hyde's hotel.

"And hurry, hurry, hurry!" she sobbed.

Chapter X

BUT for all Barbara Weir's breathless hurry she was too late, and two days dragged by on leaden feet before the disinterested thousands who had never heard of Linda Hyde, or the tragedy of her life, read in a newspaper paragraph that "the body of a woman found in the Thames has been identified as that of Linda Mary Hyde, wife of Edmund Hyde of Great Longton, Surrey," and there followed the usual kindly suggestions of a nervous breakdown and expressions of sympathy with "the heart-broken husband."

And that was the end of the search. They had been days of nightmare to Barbara, and it was with a sense of unutterable relief that she knew the suspense was ended.

"If only I'd kept awake that afternoon! If only I hadn't let myself sleep!" she said passionately many times to Edmund. "I blame myself—I blame myself."

"That's absurd," he answered, roughly. "You are to blame less than any of us. You were kind

to her——" and he stopped, choked by the memory of the last time he saw his wife, and the way in which he had driven her from him. "If only I can shield her memory——" he said again after a moment. "But people are talking, they are bound to talk."

But the truth never really came out, though there were many conjectures and unkind suggestions.

"The past will bury itself," Barbara comforted him. "It's wonderful how quickly things are forgotten."

Edmund laughed mirthlessly.

"According to Asher, this will never be forgotten until he stands face to face with Langely," he said, grimly. "And when he does—well, God help Langely."

Barbara made no reply; she had not spoken to Asher since that day in the hotel, though once or twice she had caught glimpses of him, and been grieved by the change and tragedy in his face.

He had taken Linda's death more to heart than any of them; his love for her had been the greatest thing in his life, and Barbara knew that he would never cease to blame himself for not having been kinder on that last tragic afternoon.

"Mr. Asher—what will he do?" she asked Edmund, timidly, and Edmund shook his head.

"Don't ask me! I don't profess to understand the fellow. He looks as ill as a dog, I know that. I suppose he'll go back to Australia——"

He had tried to make friends with his brother-in-law, and Asher had done his best to respond, but both men were aware of failure.

Asher had refused to stay in Edmund's house.

"I'm better alone," had been his excuse. "This place is haunted for me."

So it was! At every corner he seemed to come face to face with the sad-eyed ghost of his sister and the sound of her laugh. One night, when circumstances had forced him to stay in the house, he had not been able to sleep for the haunting sound of a foxtrot tune rattled out on a gramophone, as he had once heard it.

And men who've stayed home all their lives
Are dancing every night with other fellows' wives.

His madness and folly had dated from that night, and now the result would have no ending, would never end until the sun went down on his life.

He tried not to think of Barbara, but she was

never out of his thoughts; coming out of his room, he seemed to see again her little slippers with their high red heels as he had seen them outside her door, he seemed to see her turning to smile good-night to him, and to hear her voice again, "See you in the morning——"

What a fool he had been! Surely madness had taken possession of him, and had only left him now to the bitterness of sanity.

He went back to London as soon as Linda was buried, and for a week he roamed about, too wretched to make plans, just killing time, and wearing himself out.

If he slept, it was only to dream of those days which he and Barbara had passed down at the cottage, to hear the sound of the wind in the trees, and the rain spattering down on the leaves, to see again Barbara's frightened eyes across the firelight; to hear again her voice with its brave attempt at defiance, and it seemed to him that with each recurring memory his villainy grew.

How he had misjudged her! No wonder she would not speak to him or take his hand.

They had met for a few moments beside Linda's grave and she had studiously avoided his eyes, and kept as far from him as possible.

There was nothing for him to hope for, no place for him on this side of the ocean.

Then one day he made up his mind and, walking into a shipping office, booked a passage back to Australia.

Perhaps out there he would be able to pick up the threads of his life afresh; perhaps out there he would learn once more to throw back his head and breathe the fresh air of freedom.

He wrote to tell Hyde of his decision, but he got no reply to his letter, and then the night before he was to sail he heard from a mutual acquaintance that his brother-in-law had gone abroad.

"The best thing he can do," Asher said. "It's what I'm going to do myself next week."

The man who told him looked at him commiseratingly.

"Yes, you've both had a rotten time," he agreed, and then after a moment he asked: "What's become of Barbara Weir? Do you remember her? She was down at Hyde's place the last time I was there."

He was surprised at the change in Asher's face, at the colour that beat into his brown skin, and the way in which his hard lips tightened.

"I don't know. I haven't seen her—lately——"

he answered jaggedly, and then presently: "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know." The other man seemed to avoid looking at him. "I always thought she and Hyde were—well; no offence meant you know, but I couldn't help seeing that that swine Langely——" he broke off helplessly, realizing that he had gone too far. But Asher made no reply; he sat for a moment staring down at the floor; then he got up abruptly, and walked away without another word.

The demon of jealousy had him by the throat again, choking him.

Barbara and Edmund! So others had thought of the possibility besides himself. And no doubt, now Linda had gone, that was what would some day happen. He tramped the streets for hours, unconscious of weariness or the cold wind that blew, unconscious of everything but his own jealousy.

She might have loved him if he had not been such a fool! That knowledge made his punishment hard to bear. She might have loved him!

Well, she did not love him now, that was certain.

After to-morrow all chance of seeing her again would have gone! After to-morrow the field would be clear for Edmund, or any other man.

Then suddenly he made up his mind; he would see her once before he left England; he would see her again, or die.

As far as he knew, she was still at the hotel, and in desperation he turned his steps in its direction.

The wind had dropped and rain was falling; it reminded him of the dark nights down at the cottage, and the ceaselessly falling rain.

Those days had been hell to him, when they might have been heaven. He walked into the hotel and stood for a moment blinded by the glare of the many lights; then he turned towards the stairs and began to make his way up to Barbara's rooms.

He had not much hope that she would be there, but he knew that he meant to find her and see her once more before he left England.

And then as he stood outside her closed door, afraid to knock, it opened and she came out.

And they stood looking at one another speechlessly, and it seemed to Barbara that in the silence she could hear the beating of her heart before Asher found his voice.

"Don't look so frightened, I've only come to say good-bye. I'm leaving England to-morrow, I shall never come back again."

She tried to answer, but her voice seemed to

have died away, and she pushed the door wide again behind her and they went into the sitting-room together.

Her trunks stood about the room half packed; one of them, the one he had unstrapped for her that first night down at the cottage, was all ready, corded and locked.

Asher looked at them and back to her white face.

"You are going away?"

"Yes—to-morrow."

And then the tragic silence fell once more and was unbroken till Asher began to plead, his voice ragged with emotion and stress of grief.

"Forgive me before I go: I'd give my life gladly if it would undo the past. I've been an unspeakable cad, and yet, for God's sake, say you forgive me."

Barbara turned her face away and closed her eyes, then she said:

"I told Linda I could never forgive you, I told Linda——" she failed for a moment, then struggled on: "I did not understand why I could not, but I know now—it was because I loved you, and it hurt—the way you treated me! It hurt so—unspeakably."

Asher gave a stifled groan.

"Barbara—oh, for God's sake——"

She looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"You are going back to Australia to-morrow—on the *Oravia?*"

"Yes."

She put out her hand and closed it about his clenched fingers.

"I am coming with you."

He stared at her like a blind man to whom sight has suddenly been restored; then he gave a choking cry, and stumbled towards her.

"Barbara! Barbara! Barbara!"

"Ruffo, dear Ruffo——"

She was sobbing unrestrainedly, the tears streaming down her face, as Asher took her in his arms, holding her as if he feared even now that some one would take her from him.

"Forgive me—forgive me—I shall never forgive myself."

"I love you——"

"Say it again! Let me see your eyes when you say it."

She flung back her head and looked at him.

"I love you. I think I've always loved you." It seemed as if he could not believe her. He was shaking from head to foot.

"Is it true?—I'm not dreaming?—Barbara—may I kiss you?"

"Please, please kiss me."

And it was long before either of them spoke again, till Barbara laid her head against his breast with a deep sigh of contentment.

"Ruffo, I can hear it beating, you've got a heart after all then!"

He shook his head and laughed shakily.

"No, I gave it to you the first time we met."

She looked up, flushing adorably.

"Really? Did you love me then?"

"I adored you."

Her eyes clouded.

"But you believed I——"

He laid his hand over her lips.

"Don't say it, I can't bear to hear you say it. I'm so ashamed, to the depths of my soul. Will you ever really forgive me? I don't deserve it, I deserve nothing from you."

She was silent for a moment, then she said with quivering lips:

"Ruffo, you once said that women were—queer things! Well—do you know that I only knew I loved you, when you were such a brute to me, in this very room—that last night."

He turned his face against her shoulder as if he could not bear her eyes to read its shame and humility, and the tears that fell were not only hers.

THE END

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